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PanMeMic Manifesto: Making meaning in the Covid-19 pandemic and the future of social interaction

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2020

PanMeMic Manifesto: Making meaning in the Covid-19 pandemic and the future of social interaction¹

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Abstract

This manifesto stems from a transmedia initiative for collective research designed to shape – from the bottom-up – a socially responsive and responsible culture of inquiry, in observing, recording, sharing and reflecting on the changes to communication and interaction caused by the COVID-19 crisis and their enduring effects post-pandemic. The objectives of the manifesto are (a) to identify key changes in communication and interaction practices during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and (b) to offer a blueprint for an innovative methodology involving academics and non-academics in collective research into these and any future changes to the communication landscape across different socio-cultural contexts. The manifesto presents: (1) the factors that make changes in communication and interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic topical for research; (2) the coordinates of these changes; (3) questions that these changes raise; (4) a proposal for a methodology that complements established research methods to understand these changes; and (5) preliminary data on the activities that the research collective PanMeMic has conducted in its first two months of existence.

Introduction

This paper presents a manifesto that stems from a transmedia initiative for collective research launched on 18 May 2020. The initiative is designed to shape – from the bottom-up – a socially responsive and responsible culture of inquiry, in observing, recording, sharing and reflecting on the changes to communication and interaction caused by the COVID-19 crisis and their enduring effects post-pandemic. The objectives of the manifesto are to:

1. Identify key changes in communication and interaction practices during and after the COVID-19 pandemic
2. Offer a blueprint for an innovative methodology involving academics and non-academics in collective research into these and any future changes to the communication landscape across different socio-cultural contexts

¹ This manifesto stems from E. Adami's article published in PanMeMic on 19 May 2020 (Adami, 2020) and her two talks, at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (China, 11 June 2020) and the UCL Visual and Multimodal Research Forum (UK, London, 19 June 2020), expanded through all co-authors' contributions in relation to their specific contexts and research expertise. We are thankful to Ben Rampton for his insightful feedback on the draft of the manifesto, as well as his constant encouragement and support to PanMeMic.

These aims have intertwined in the founding of PanMeMic: Pandemic Meaning Making of Interaction and Communication. It is a transmedia space that gathers academics and non-academics worldwide to share and discuss reflections, observations, and experiences of these changes, as well as fears and possibilities for the future of our social lives.

This manifesto presents: (1) the factors that make changes in communication and interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic topical for research; (2) the coordinates of these changes; (3) questions that these changes raise; (4) a proposal for a methodology that complements established research methods to understand these changes; and (5) preliminary data on the activities that the research collective PanMeMic has conducted in its first two months of existence.

Before we start, let us clarify our use of “we” in this manifesto. “We” as authorial voice refers to the members of the PanMeMic founding team who have signed this piece; we are semioticians and linguists based in different countries and continents. As partial as our positioning is, it benefits from combining our different local perspectives on a global phenomenon with our shared transnational research interests and goals. “We” is also used as a more general sense, as humans who have had to change our habits during the pandemic; with this, we do not claim that the changes we highlight affect everybody on the planet in the same way. Quite the contrary, precisely because the pandemic is a global event taking place in a world that is extremely socially diverse with unevenly distributed economic and social power, we start from hypothesizing potentially shared changes as a means to start a conversation and gather a much wider range of perspectives. The aim is to make the best of distributed knowledge so we can collectively begin to grasp and construct a better picture of this multifaceted phenomenon.

1. Why communication and interaction in the pandemic matter

The pandemic has unprecedented effects on the ways we organise and regulate all aspects and domains of our social lives, including how to conduct activities, how to interact with others, and how to manage space – both offline and online, as well as in the porous lines between these two types of environment. Yet, hitherto, the focus has been on the health, economic, behavioural, and representational aspects of the virus. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, research has understandably prioritized the pursuit of knowledge about the virus itself in the health sciences, its impact on societies’ economies in economics, and crisis communication in the behavioural sciences, to predict how populations would respond to policies (Bavel et al. 2020). In linguistics and health communication studies, projects have started to examine representations, discourses and metaphors of the pandemic (e.g., Meng et al., 2020; Schlögl & Jones, 2020; Back, Tulskey & Arnold, 2020; <https://viraldiscourse.com/>). These studies all focus on the pandemic as their chief subject of investigation.

While necessary, the focus on these immediate priorities is not enough. In only a few months, people around the world have had to undergo radical changes in the way they relate to others and conduct themselves, to such an extent that many predict the pandemic marks a historical threshold (e.g., Friedman 2020). These changes are unprecedented in their global, abrupt and pervasive

character. They are the effect of a series of factors, none of which is new in its own right; yet their intertwining is.

1.1. The human body as the source: Keeping bodies apart

The pandemic – by definition – is a global phenomenon, because of the extent and pace of the spread of the virus (and possibly its global perception has been accentuated by the virus hitting heavily also the richest areas of the world, like China, Europe and the USA). The changes provoked have also a global character because the virus presents one shared danger affecting the human body. Unlike in a war, where the enemy for one side is the ally for the other, the virus is a shared danger for each and every body.

Precisely because it affects the human body, which is at the same time a potential target and a potential vector (see Washer 2010: 55 “innocent and guilty victim”), policies and regulations might vary across localities and change through time but have one basic shared aim, that is, to keep bodies apart. Some of us might be in lockdown while elsewhere such restrictions may be easing or may never have been imposed; yet, in spite of all differences, from one- to two-meter social distance² to stricter self-isolation, from the banning of large gatherings to orders against all non-essential activities, from not touching other people and surfaces to wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), the underlying global warning is that bodies need to be separated to be safe.

Because bodies are humans’ main medium for connecting and communicating with others and the world, and the locus of human identity (Harre 1990), keeping bodies apart has radically reshaped social interaction practices.

1.2. An unprecedented communication infrastructure: Keeping people connected

Intertwining with this is the fact that humanity now has infrastructures for live distance communication to an extent that was impossible only a couple of decades ago. Combined with the need to keep bodies apart, this has meant the move of many social activities online for an unprecedented number of people and in an equally unprecedented wide range of spheres of human activities, with related needs of adaptation.

The complex system of live distance communication has also enabled a totalising effect on communication. For months, the pandemic has been the focus of attention in mass media, social media as well as private exchanges, with real time transnational flows of information, so one could envisage their own future through the recounts of those in areas hit first. This has taken place under the leit motif of uncertainty combined with urgency. The virus is new and needs to be examined carefully, yet there is the urgent need to mitigate its impact.

² We use here ‘social distance’ to refer to policies and practices regulating the safety distance between bodies. In this, we follow Hall’s (1969) introduction of the concept – and avoid instead the derivation ‘social distancing’ that has entered common use during the pandemic. The latter triggers a meaning (‘to distance oneself from sociality’), that is not implied in the need of keeping bodies at a safe distance (although the implications on sociality might be many, which is one of the concerns of the manifesto).

Thanks to a live information system, we have witnessed the chaotic process of knowledge in the making. This has involved science, as politicians use bits of it, and journalists make it available to the public, while scientists themselves discuss findings on social media. It has also involved everybody sharing and comparing sources, hypotheses and potential practices, in a contradictory and conflictual – at time even manipulative – but also cooperative and agentic attempt at trying to make sense of an unknown phenomenon and how to act in it.

1.3. Global, totalising, abrupt and pervasive character

The changes in our social lives have a global scope, have totalised our attention and have had an abrupt and pervasive character. While some countries have been more responsive than others, the realisation of the potentially deadly effects of a “wait and see” approach has led not only bureaucracies but also people, communities and private organisations to move at pace to implement social distance policies. Differently and similarly, we all have been forced to change quickly our habitus in carrying out everyday activities and basic actions.

Because the danger affects our bodies, and prevention attempts involve keeping bodies apart, changes in how to carry out basic actions have involved everybody and all spheres of life, to a greater or smaller extent. The dimensions of social interaction have changed their combinatory possibilities, as the times and paces, the spaces and places of our activities and roles have had to change, as well as the media and semiotic resources through which we carry them out.

At the same time, various societies have responded to the challenges posed by COVID-19 differently, as a reflection of their values and ideals. Some changes might affect social groups differently (for example, in certain sociocultural contexts the keeping apart of bodies was already the norm between different genders). Cross-cultural comparisons could elicit insights not only into different societies and their people but also into the import of both shared and specific changes.

1.4. A re-disciplining process

Because of the centrality of the human body, as the practices into which we had habituated ourselves are no longer safe or possible, we have had to re-discipline our bodies and how we go about to do things. The restrictions imposed to our bodies demand us to rethink the ways we engage with one another and perform our daily activities now often digitally remediated as there is a technological infrastructure that makes it possible.

Activities have changed places, spaces, media and meaning-making resources. This has involved forced sudden changes in many spheres of our social lives, including work, learning, leisure, parenting, performing rituals, caring, interpersonal and institutional relations. From participating in a work meeting, to going food shopping, from socialising to schooling, from basic hygiene in the house to going outside, the rules and practices that we used to be familiar with and which came naturally to us, are no longer valid.

Re-disciplining our bodies when carrying out everyday activities involves un-learning what we had automated and learning new ways of being and acting in the making (see also Turner's 1969 "liminality", which links also to our discussion of "threshold" in Section 2.4 below). These emerge in a situated way, as the intertwining of structural possibilities and people's agencies. As this is new in many fields of social activities, there is a permanent state of alertness when carrying out very basic actions. We are not habituated yet; in other words, what was familiar before is no more, while there is not a "new familiar" yet. We have been making conscious decisions for bodily movements which in the past we performed without thinking. From basic body movements, such as touching somebody or walking while keeping social distance, to more abstract levels of social activities, such as managing our role in an online group meeting or negotiating our needs with those of others in a public space, the re-disciplining process requires us constantly to be aware, to assess, co-construct, and negotiate how to go about doing things with others. Therefore, it is more likely that everybody has a heightened awareness of their actions. Awareness takes effort and may create stressful and uncomfortable situations, but offers a unique opportunity for reflection and self-reflection too.

Whichever way our practices develop (depending on the global and local situation and policies on the virus), this heightened awareness of everyday actions cannot last long. Humans need to automate learned ways of doing things to function in a complex society (see Bateson's 1972 levels of learning; see also Williamson, Eynon & Potter, 2020; Zerbe, 2020). Impossible as this may seem right now, we might soon naturalise the practices that are currently under construction. It would then be too late to trace the dynamics, sensations, emotions, meanings and effects of these rapid and all-pervasive changes. In sum, while we are all – differently and similarly – undergoing this unprecedented re-disciplining process, we are at a unique moment in history to capitalise on the distributed knowledge potentially arising from a diffused heightened awareness. We need to gather reflections now and we need to do this collectively.

2. The coordinates of the changes

We said earlier that "the dimensions of social interaction have changed their combinatory possibilities". Before we propose a way to make the best of the distributed knowledge being developed, we introduce here below the key changes in communication and interaction along the key coordinates of mediation, channels of perceptions, semiotic resources and meaning-making practices, and "interaction order" (Goffman 1983).

2.1. Mediation

The body has always been humans' main mediator in the interactions with the world and others. Yet the pandemic comes at a time in history when humans have available a plethora of media for distance interaction and communication. As the bodies need to be separated, mediation with others and the world has been regulated anew in the physical environment while at the same time shifting to the screens of our digital devices.

The physical world people inhabit and navigate has shrunk for those on lockdown, while for all it is newly regulated, often times also marked visually by all sorts of signage and materially through the redesign of public spaces. The metaphor of the “bubble”, previously used for social media networks (from Pariser, 2011), has now been applied to physical contexts.

Counterbalancing the physical separation of bodies, connectivity with others and the world has moved online. Digitally-mediated practices of working from home, distance learning, as well as emergent recreational practices, such as hanging out with friends over video-conferencing, invite a review and rethink of the social practices we were once familiar with. What is gained and lost in the shifts in practices? Which of these practices will endure post-pandemic? Who will benefit and who will struggle?

This has had as a first result a heightening of the social injustice and exclusion effects produced by the digital divide in our societies, i.e., between those who have technologies and connectivity, as well as the semiotic and material resources needed to use them successfully (from familiarity with using certain apps to a private quiet place), and those who do not. In this we need to remind ourselves that every “we” we use or assume when referring to aspects of online interaction excludes those who have less than ideal access to connectivity, technology, literacy and household.

Rather than through travel, the world can be accessed mainly through screens, which may offer windows into deserted cities and animals re-appropriating neighbourhoods, a world made possible only precisely because humans’ physical access to it has been restricted. This comes with possibilities, for those who have digital access, to participate to events and activities that would be inaccessible otherwise (as with live concerts or workshops held in a different country). Yet, the restrictions in physical mobility carry with them a reduction in social serendipity: even in sociocultural contexts where it was earlier common practice, it is harder to have meaningful encounters with strangers, and our means of contact with others are often limited to audio-visual ones, which points to a further radical change.

2.2. Afforded channels of perception

The need to keep bodies apart has increased reliance on auditory and visual channels of perceptions in our relations with others and the world. This holds both for mediation online and in our physical environments.

Screens afford meaning making only through visual and auditory resources, as most available digital technologies for communication rule out touch, smell, proprioceptive senses, and all the synesthetic processes related to our complex sensory perception. Furthermore, auditory and visual perceptions are differently constrained online than in physical environments, where we can rely on peripheral vision and 360-degree hearing. Inputs from peripheral vision and the sounds that surround us in the physical environment become possible sources for distraction and need to be filtered out when we are participating in interactions online. Online, sound production and processing need to be heavily regulated. Attending to multiple sound inputs is difficult or even impossible. Microphones and speakers interfere with how loud we are to others and turn usually low audio-volume actions (like typing, breathing, or handling objects) into loud noises for other

participants. Visually, on the other hand, we can still attend to multiple inputs on the screen, as in multiparty interactions such as those on video-calls. At the same time, with everybody watching and being watched by everybody else, and regulating audio production and processing, even informal web meetings can be extremely energy consuming.

Also in our physical environments outside the safety of our private homes (which might be more or less safe depending on who we are living with), we need to rely mainly on auditory and visual channels of perception to manage our interactions, as touch is no longer safe and embodied co-presence needs to be at a farther distance. The visual has now a main role in managing proxemics (or regulation of body movement in space), in detecting body trajectories to adjust our own to keep social distance.

A heavy reliance on visual and auditory channels of perception can have dramatic consequences for everybody, but carries heightened risk of exclusion for people with impaired vision and hearing in particular. As we all experience these restrictions in access to channels of perception, the pandemic offers a much needed (and overdue) opportunity to deepen our appreciation of the technological, communicative and social challenges faced by people with disabilities not only during but also before the COVID-19 crisis. Upholding the rights of people with disabilities, especially their access to health services (UN 2020), has rightly received considerable attention during the pandemic, as they are among the first to suffer in dire times (Goodley 2011). Complementing these efforts with a focus on revealing the ableist and other biases built into communication technologies and practices (Alper and Goggin 2017; Djonov & Van Leeuwen, 2018a, 2018b; Everts 2012) and examining emergent technologically-mediated practices holds much value for developing what Goggin et al (2019) refer to as collaborative, mutually inclusive and sustainable practices and policies, and thereby improving social justice for people with visual, hearing and other impairments (see also Al Zidjaly 2015).

2.3. Semiotic resources and meaning-making practices

As mediation and channels change, so do the semiotic resources and their functional role in our meaning-making practices.

Online, while the use of resources relying on hearing needs to be heavily regulated, visual resources are often used innovatively (e.g. waving goodbye instead of saying it in an online meeting). Emergent meaning-making practices through the multimodal orchestration of online activities are not a novelty of the pandemic, of course, and have been investigated extensively in multimodal studies (for a review Adami 2017). Rather than novelty, it is a matter of acceleration and widening. During the pandemic more people have had to resort to online forms of interaction, with many activities that would be normally carried out in physical co-presence being reshaped to be carried out online. This has involved a massive learning curve in digital literacy as well as a lot of creativity in compensating for the resources not available in online communication, such as showing a hug or kiss on the screen or finding ways of perceiving togetherness when dancing or playing music online as embodied co-presence is ruled out.

In physical environments outside our homes, the keeping of bodies apart and safe and the reliance on mainly audio-visual channels has produced major shifts in the resources we use to make meaning. Gazes and gestures play a big part in communication when speech is muffled by face coverings, and eye contact gains even more salience as the centre of face expression when the mouth is hidden behind a mask. As for proxemics, the way in which people manage space in relation to others has become an index on where somebody stands in relation to the virus and as a signifier of a person's level of care and respect for others' safety. Through the visual channel of perception, how bodies move or are positioned has become a marker of social responsibility. Also many signifiers for social interaction in public have reversed their value/meaning: while coming close to somebody now can be perceived as a sign of disrespect rather than closeness, turning the back to somebody can be meant as a sign of care and respect when approaching them in a narrow place that does not allow social distance. The distanced bodies and the use of facemasks have an impact on the auditory and hence our speaking practices. Covered mouths are a challenge for all those who rely on lip reading as a support to comprehension (not only for those with hearing impairments but also for many living in multilingual, "superdiverse" contexts, Blommaert and Rampton 2016; Adami 2018). When speaking we would need to be louder, which clashes with some of the social values we would attribute to loudness, so in contexts in which loudness is (or used to be) less acceptable, speech is reduced to a minimum, only when essential, and reliance on visual semiotic resources becomes even more crucial.

While channels of perception afford certain semiotic resources, these may or may not be taken up. Semiotic resources are socially developed (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001) and their uses depend on the value and role they have in different contexts, for different social groups and in different communicative situations. So, for example, although the auditory channel of perception is safe, in many places during lockdown silence has been noticeable (see the Institute of Acoustics' The Quiet Project <https://www.thequietproject.co.uk/>). With bodies kept further apart, voices could have been raised to reach others. Instead in cities, except for rituals (such as singing flash mobs from the windows in lockdown places in Italy and Spain, clapping for key workers in the UK and Argentina, or shouting "Presente!" ["I'm here!"] from the homes to participate in live streamed protests in Uruguay) people have often reduced talking to a minimum, possibly because being loud in public has been increasingly regulated and stigmatized. This, together with the need to keep at a distance and the danger associated with anybody who is not part of our "bubble" might be accelerating a trend towards minimising chance interactions with strangers. If this is the case, what could be the implications for our social selves in the future? And in the meantime, what are the implications of this (at least temporary) reshuffling of associations between signifiers and signifieds, while points of references between old social practices and emerging safer ones are collapsing, and there is a potential constant reassessment and reshuffling of the identities people intentionally "give" and the ones they "give off" (Goffman 1959)?

2.4. Interaction Order

The global, abrupt and pervasive changes in times, spaces, places, media, channels, and semiotic resources of our social life have resulted in what Rampton (2020) has defined as a "re-setting of the parameters of the interaction order" at all levels. Private and public have separated in some

sense and yet have merged in another. The signifiers and boundaries of formality and informality are also being redefined, as front stage and backstage (Goffman 1959) invade each other.

In our physical worlds, the threshold between private and public is more marked than ever, because of the level of preparation and awareness necessary to cross it safely – for the actions and precautions needed both when going outdoor where the danger is, and when going back into our private spaces, to keep them safe. The crossing of the threshold marks spatially a temporal crossing, between habits of the “before times”, which we can still have in our private space, and the re-disciplining of our bodies into new habits outside in public. The spatial separation between past (habituated) and present (new) semiotic regimes makes the threshold one of a continuous re-disciplining. The threshold comes with us outside too (evidenced by the visual and spoken metaphor of the bubble) to delimit the safe space of our bodies (and intimate interaction unit) and that of others.

While the separation of public and private is marked for the different semiotic regimes of “outdoors” vs “at home”, as many of our activities have moved online, the private and public have invaded each other too. While our private rooms have become offices and schools, or tv show settings and parliamentary seats, we have all accessed and given access to slices of private spaces through public activities on our screens. If we live with others, we have had also access to public spheres of their lives (parents witnessing their kids during classes, partners hearing each other in their professional registers, or children entering their parents’ work meetings).

As a consequence, the parameters of formality and informality have shifted – looks, outfits and hairstyles have varied largely, with faces less groomed appearing alongside very beautified ones, both on our screens and in our streets. This might have brought with it a sense of closing a distance, with our bosses, colleagues, celebrities, and politicians. And it might be propelling changes that many have thought never possible (e.g. eye contact in public spaces in Islamic societies that typically frown upon direct gaze). Questions arise though in many respects. One, for example, is about privacy, given that what occurs on screens can be video-recorded and, even if it is not, it leaves a trace as data about us. Another is about how to compensate for the crucial role of informal interactions in many settings, e.g., co-workers sharing concerns on working conditions, schoolmates complaining or giving each other tips while walking to class, activists discussing plans for social action, or politicians setting the ground for crucial negotiations through corridor conversations. Fully private and confidential interactions play a vital and complex role in society, yet they are enabled only if the mediation prevents recording. How will we cope with the absence of “corridor talks”? What other resources will people develop to fulfil those interactional functions?

Also, is this the acceleration of a trend towards a calendarization and a datafication of all our interactions? Again, what are the implications of having fewer possibilities for social serendipity? And what are the implications particularly for those communities, social groupings, generations, personalities, and occupations that usually rely on physical contact and close proximity?

In a nutshell, the semiotic regimes (that is, patterns of associations between forms and meanings) of our interaction order have collapsed – at least momentarily – and we are in a phase in which we need to renegotiate them anew. The conventions of the past (although messy, situated, contested, varied, diverse and constantly evolving even then) do not hold anymore and we are going about detecting and constructing new conventions in each different situation. It is vital to understand the gains and losses in each of these changes (see for example Lim, 2020, on learning), the adjustments, and what the implications would be for our social lives if any of these changes were carried forward into our future.

This is why we need to research changes now while there is heightened awareness of the re-disciplining processes, and we need to do it live and publicly, to be able to voice concerns, dangers, possibilities and good practices in a timely manner. Doing it only once we have peer-reviewed verified evidence-based findings might be too late. In the next section we sketch some key dimensions of change requiring investigation, before presenting how we have engaged in researching these changes.

3. What demands investigation

We urgently need to understand how these coordinates of change impact different demographics, in different places, for different social roles, in a world that is globally connected and yet characterised by inequalities. We also need to assess which changes are new, which others are rather an acceleration of trends that were already underway in certain domains and social groups, and which ones might instead be a rejection of past trends. This will again vary for different demographics and roles in different places. The accelerated changes (like the move of some activities online, or the reduced occasions for chance interactions with strangers, for example) are particularly significant to detect as it seems reasonable to hypothesise that they might be more likely to remain even if and when the pandemic is successfully managed.

We need to trace the implications of each of these changes and their intertwining. A way to examine this is to assess what in multimodal studies we call the “gains and losses” (Kress, 2005) such changes bring. This means to analyse what each (old and new) practice makes easy, possible and likely or difficult, impossible or unlikely to do in different aspects, sensorially, materially, cognitively, emotionally, socially, symbolically, and politically – and for whom.

What are the implications across different demographics and sociocultural contexts of:

- disciplining our bodies to keep apart from each other
- conceiving our social worlds as bubbles
- reshaping many activities as digitally mediated
- relying mainly on audio-visual resources for making meaning and interacting with others – with all possible implications for materiality (when touch is heavily limited in public and activities are digitally mediated)
- operating with a marked threshold between private and public physical environments, while merging private and public domains in our online interactions
- intensifying the association of intimate with safe and stranger with danger

- subjecting our bodies and interactions to accelerated calendarization, datafication, and the impact on personal freedom, agency and social serendipity
- renegotiating the relation between social responsibility, individual choices and our connections with others and the world, including in under-examined sociocultural contexts.

The urgent need to examine and understand these changes stems from the fact that the pandemic has provided researchers and lay people alike a glimpse into what it means (and feels like) undergoing a global, totalising, abrupt and pervasive social transformation, the tipping point that might lead to what some metaphorically call a New Earth (Tolle 2002). Capturing this process as it unfolds is especially important if we are ever to properly theorize the relationship between technology, semiotics and social change (for more on this relationship see Morozov 2011 and Blommaert 2018).

4. How to develop understanding: Innovating semiotic research

The whole scientific community involved in developing knowledge on the virus has changed its practices towards a more open and live sharing of data and information, towards voicing different positions publicly, while knowledge is being developed, and towards accelerating the publication of studies even when findings are only provisional – prioritising urgency over thorough verification – as timely decisions have to be made (Kupferschmidt, 2020). To pursue knowledge of the changes in communication and social interaction, we too have felt the need to innovate our research methods and practices, as there are equally good reasons to prioritise immediacy and the voicing of multiple perspectives, to be able to hypothesise the implications that these changes might have on our social lives in time to raise awareness and enable different groups in our societies to voice informed concerns and mobilise to influence policies.

Two caveats are in order. First, we believe research on such complex changes must incorporate diverse disciplinary perspectives. In our call for methodological innovation we focus on semiotic research, which is interdisciplinary itself, involving scholars in semiotics, linguistics, visual and cultural anthropology, media and communication studies, education and other fields in the arts, humanities and social sciences. In our call we look at participatory methods developed in these fields as well as in the natural sciences to shape a methodological proposal. Second, we are by no means advocating for abandoning established research methods and practices, which need to continue, as first-hand reflections and observations do require verification through robust data analysis.

We also need to acknowledge the limitations of academic research methods and practices when faced with the need to understand such a complex phenomenon. Current research methods struggle to grasp a phenomenon that is not only global, but produces changes that are fast, fleeting, contradictory, impacting subjectivities differently, shaping social realities beyond the (Western) contexts that tend to dominate academia, through a complex intertwining between what is shared and what differs across places, subjectivities, roles and demographics. Beyond limitations, research has a unique opportunity, while the re-disciplining process is ongoing and everywhere many observe, reflect, and metacomment on the changes they have been experiencing. Research

has the unique chance to respond to the demand for timely informed positions, before these changes become permanent. This is why we have felt the need to start new forms of inquiry now, while there is still room for impacting on changes. These new forms of inquiry try to make the best of a distributed awareness, heightened perception and self-reflexivity on the changes, as tracing experiences back will be nearly impossible once new practices have habituated and naturalised. Academic research can play a vital role in providing tools to systematize, analyse, reflect upon, and give recognition to this distributed knowledge that is being developed.

Hence, we have felt the need to pair (rather than replace) established semiotic research methodologies and practices with new ones that foster a live, public, dynamic and relational form of inquiry beyond our academic circles.

Precedents of a live, public, relational and processual form of inquiry can be found in the Socratic tradition of developing knowledge, as well as in the more contemporary metalogue (Bateson, 1972), which we can combine today with the affordances of the online medium, to make conversations transnational, live and permanently traceable (see, for example, Carrington, 2020). Precedents in making the best of distributed knowledge can be found in the many differentiated traditions under the umbrella label of “citizen science”. Citizen science is “the involvement of the public in scientific research – whether community-driven research or global investigations” (<https://www.citizenscience.org/>). Forms of involvement of non-trained scientists at different stages of the research process have at least a couple of centuries long tradition particularly in the natural sciences (for reviews Kullenberg & Kasperowski 2016; Lewenstein 2016). Although more recent, the involvement of non-professional researchers has taken various shapes also in the social sciences and humanities – with different labels, including, collaborative, co-design, co-production, co-research, or participatory action research (Watson et. al. 2012 for disability studies; Facer and Pahl, 2017; for a crowdsourced research project on the pandemic in anthropology: <https://anthrocovid.com/>). Closer to domains related with communication, “citizen sociolinguistics”(cf. Rymes & Leone 2014; Rymes 2020; Svendsen 2018) has started to consider the role of non-trained linguists for the development of knowledge, awareness and impact onto language use.

As both Rymes and Leone (2014) and Svendsen (2018) point out, debates on the different approaches to citizen science highlight a series of issues and different takes, which involve the specific role of the non-academic researchers and the stages of their involvement, which traditionally involve data collection, but can also contribute to research question formulation, up to analysis and co-authorship of outputs. Discussions often focus on issues of research ethics as well as the degree of reliability of findings. There is general agreement on the fact that, against academics’ diminished control over the research (in some or all of its stages), the involvement of non-academics as researchers results in the access to wider data and to more diversified positionalities and perspectives; it also results in values and practices involved in doing research being shared with sectors of the public, increased informed awareness on specific issues, and potentially transformative relations between academics and non-academics, and their impact for change.

To build timely understanding and knowledge of the communicative changes brought about by the pandemic and to foresee the implications for the future of social interaction, we have felt the need

to innovate in semiotic research methodology and practice to include (and adequately adapt) both the Socratic tradition and that of citizen science. In the section that follows we sketch the principles of this semiotic research method by introducing the collective research initiative we have started in mid May 2020. As a note, we prefer to call it collective semiotic research rather than “citizen semiotics” as we do not want it to be associated with exclusionary institutional practices related to citizenship.

5. PanMeMic: Towards a collective semiotic research



PanMeMic is a transmedia space for those who want to develop understanding on changes in communication and social interaction. The founding team of PanMeMic are 30 researchers in multimodality (for introductions to the field, Bateman et al., 2017; Jewitt et al., 2016) – linguists and semioticians. Each member is based in a different country, covering all continents (see members at <https://panmemic.hypotheses.org/credits>). Each founding team member functions as a node on the PanMeMic network, involving others, both academics in various disciplines and non-academics who are interested in the topic, with the aim to pursue understanding of how the pandemic has changed communication practices and what this means for the future of social interaction.

PanMeMic is a transmedia space because it unfolds through a [website](#) and different social media platforms (including [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [WeChat](#) and [WeiBo](#), with a YouTube channel being set up at the moment of writing), using the specific affordances of each to develop live, public and conversational ways of pursuing collective understanding.

The initiative is at its very start (launched publicly on 18th May) and works on the following set of embryonic principles:

- Voluntary character: everybody contributes what they wish and activities emerge depending on those who have interest in developing them
- Individual responsibility: no editorial or peer-review process prior to publishing; everybody has responsibility for what they share and receives feedback openly by others
- Sharing and collaboration: sharing and collaboration are facilitated through the principle of recognition of each contribution, to minimise the risk of appropriation
- Public and live conversation: understanding and development of knowledge is pursued through interactions with others, which, by occurring on social media, are public and can be publicly followed, joined and contributed to live (possibly the most distinctive and

innovative aspect compared to the extant traditions in citizen science and participatory methods).

While created with the immediate goal of responding to the changes brought about by the pandemic, the “pan” (= Greek “all”) in PanMeMic also represents the global character of the initiative in building a community of people interested in changes on communication and social interaction well beyond the immediate emergency.

The scope of PanMeMic includes any spheres of communication and social interaction that can be investigated, reflected upon and discussed (see Table 1 below for a rough thematic analysis of the topics emerged in two months’ time of activities). As the phenomenon is broad, multifaceted and pervasive, this broad scope has the potential to develop an inventory of possible research topics and parallel strands of domain-specific projects. For instance, posts published on the PanMeMic website have already led to a collaborative initiative in higher education, with a focus on the role that students jointly across the globe can play in researching the effects of COVID-19 on communication and interaction.

From a methodological perspective, (i) a first phase of the research initiative encourages reflexivity by inviting people to share reflections, observations, and experiences, and discuss them. Further research stages will involve (ii) developing methods for collection and analysis of these experiences, data and discussions, as well as (iii) agreeing on more structured ways of conducting collective research in relation to how to (iv) derive implications for the future – the losses and the gains – the possibilities and the threats and dangers, (v) provide indications on good practices and policies, and (vi) shape forms of collective actions that try to have an impact towards positive change for the common good, with the overall aim of minimizing the risks for the future of social interactions, and design new and better futures.

We are writing this manifesto now, while we are still at the first phase, and have more questions than answers on how to proceed, for two reasons. Firstly, we want to be coherent with the principle of live public conversation on the very unfolding of the research process. Secondly, and possibly more importantly, we are deeply aware that we need to call for everybody’s contributions to respond to the challenges that we have ahead of us and shape collectively the next stages of this methodological innovation.

We can however present some preliminary data of the activities generated so far, to give an idea of the potentialities, as well as the challenges.

In two months of activities (18 May – 17 July 2020), the website has published 12 articles and attracted 4,536 unique visitors (for a total of 7,907 visits, excluding Robots/Spiders visits) and 42 comments. The website in itself is not very different to other academic forms of online dissemination, such as <https://viraldiscourse.com> and <https://www.diggitmagazine.com>. Its connection with the activities on social media is rather the locus of a novel form of public, live and conversational inquiry.

Overall, the PanMeMic social media accounts have engaged over 1,300 people in two months. The PanMeMic Facebook group (a format that is showing to be particularly apt to foster engagement and conversations) has reached 746 members, 242 posts (with peaks of 10 posts a day), 731

comments (with peaks of 45 comments a day) and 3,384 so-called “reactions” (i.e., likes and other reaction emojis). A preliminary thematic analysis of the posts in the Facebook group (achieved by assigning only one coding label to each post, without considering the comments) shows the range of topics discussed, as listed in Table 1 here below.

Ads	Fears	Online gigs	Smiles
Anti COVID parties	Food	Painting	Snowmen
App visuals	Gaze	Parody	Socialising
Arab response	Gestures	Paths	Software updates
Architecture	Greetings	Play	Solidarity
Black lives matter	Gyms	Political discourse	Soundscape
Bodies in space	Hairstyles	Political posters	Space
Borders	Head protections	Populism	Spiritual growth
Branding	Health costs	PPEs	Stores
Calls	Hearing impairment	Products & Services	Street art
Campus life	Home spaces	Protests	Surgeons
Children's language	Hugs	Public communication	Teaching
Children's art craft	Infographics	Public policing behaviour	TikTok
Comics	Kindness & surveillance	Public signs	Touch
Dance	Language	Public transport	Toys
Digital learning	Loneliness	Queue	Travels
Drive-ins	Masks	Rainbow	TV shows
Eid's cards	Memes	Rave culture	US
Elections	Music	Redesign of places	Videocalls
Emails	Mutual aid groups	Research	Visual metaphors
Emojis	Nationalism	Risks	Waving
Exams	Neologisms	Rituals	Working from home
Exhibitions	New normal	Romance	Workplaces
Face coverings	Objects	Semiotic technologies	Writing
Fashion	Offline-online	Smell	

Table 1. List of topics of the PanMeMic website articles and Facebook group posts – 18 May-17 July 2020.

Types of posts vary from the sharing of observations, reflections on one's own practices, requests for advice and links to news items asking for opinions, to the uploading of photos capturing scenes in one's own environment. Discussions in the comments often multiply the perspective by adding observations from people based in other countries, generating transnational exchanges that give a sense of the complex intertwining between sharedness and specificities of the global phenomenon for each given topic being discussed, thus enriching the individual's positionality and understanding in a way that would not be possible otherwise.

Posting is done mainly in English but occasionally posts in other languages have appeared (which can be followed thanks to the automatic translation functionality of the platform). We are currently

evaluating the possibility of developing parallel spaces in other languages to enable more inclusivity. The public character of all PanMeMic social media activity has already enabled porosity with Whatsapp groups (particularly used in the Middle East). While national restrictions make social media platforms not accessible everywhere (so Facebook is not accessible in China and Iran, for example), our members based in those countries function as nodes to facilitate exchange across topics shared in different spaces.

We are bringing these preliminary data to give a sense of the amount of involvement that the initiative has generated through a merely voluntary effort. We believe they provide an indication of the level of interest as well as the potentialities of opening semiotic research through a public and live type of discussion, by using the affordances of social media platforms and by drawing on people's enhanced self-reflexivity in times when each of us is re-disciplining their habituated interaction practices.

As the participation across social media continues to expand, we need to develop methods to assess the kind of knowledge produced, and to combine spontaneous/organic engagement and more structured forms of inquiry. Even before assessing the level and type of knowledge produced, we treat and consider all contributions as some sort of research work (rather than "data" that professional researchers can subject to analysis). After all, while the protocols for what academia defines as research are (varied and changing and yet) rather limited, we believe there are different forms and ways to develop understanding and knowledge, well beyond the heavily logocentric academic practice.

Academia might have developed a powerful (in the sense that it generates power) vocabulary and discursive practices to talk, write, describe, define and explain phenomena, but might struggle to recognize and benefit from knowledge expressed and embodied through other semiotic resources and practices. Therefore a collective semiotic research method that involves non-academic researchers has the potential to construct "recognition" (Bezemer and Kress, 2016) for forms of inquiry that are less logocentric, such as those of professionals who have a specialized expertise in communication and interaction, e.g., film-makers, artists (for a similar rationale on research on language, see The AILA Research Network on Creative Inquiry in Applied Linguistics <https://creativeinquiryaila.wordpress.com/>), but also health workers who communicate and interact with patients and their bodies, for example.

We are facing a phenomenon that has global, totalising and yet very differentiated effects and is forcing abrupt and pervasive changes through a re-disciplining process of bodies and ways to go about to do things, through a level and change of mediation that has hardly any precedents in human history. To understand it we need to join forces with all those who have a special insight into these changes and make the best of everybody's observations and reflections on the changes that they are undergoing.

Communication and social interactions are not at all minor issues or by-products of how our societies function; they are factors contributing to shape them (and are reshaped by them). Starting from the occasion of the pandemic, it is the time to build a semiotic research methodology to investigate these factors live, publicly, dialogically and collectively. The convergence and transmedia features of social media platforms can enable it while keeping a record of the

conversational inquiry taking place. Paired with more established research methods in semiotics, this can provide a starting point to tackle societal issues in a timely manner and overcome some of the challenges that semiotic research struggles to address. Our endeavour hopes to advance the goal of building up a community of academics and non-academics with a shared interest in the socially responsive and responsible engagement with the changes stemming from the pandemic and shaping the post-pandemic new normal.

In sum, PanMeMic hopes to contribute to a better understanding of interaction and communication practices in pandemic times and, more broadly, the dynamics of change in semiotic practices (i.e. in and after the pandemic). In designing a transmedia live public conversational form of inquiry among social actors and stakeholders with different backgrounds and interests, we will hopefully be able to open a global space for dialogic, collaborative work in which we can better evaluate “gains and losses”, in terms of the semiotic resources available for and the emerging meaning making practices of interaction and communication of our time. This, in turn, will allow us to reflect on how societies can collectively – both locally and globally – benefit from such “gains” as well as to design socially responsible strategies to “compensate” for losses.

The potential contribution of PanMeMic, however, goes beyond semiotic analysis in times of the pandemic. The principles of our methodology and research design for semiotic analysis can also help build a public culture of responsible inquiry into reality grounded on informed observations (very much needed in a time marked by new strategies aimed to manipulate public opinion), as well as help us renegotiate our own identities and positionalities as researchers by sharing, collaborating, debating and learning from/with other social actors.

We hope this manifesto can open a fruitful discussion, as we need everybody’s contribution and imaginary to shape the next steps. We wish to conclude by inviting those who read to join us.

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