EDITORIAL

BECKY ALEXIS-MARTIN
Manchester Metropolitan University

ADI KUNTSMAN
Manchester Metropolitan University

LIU XIN
University of Helsinki

This year, global efforts have been focused on containing the devastating spread of COVID-19. Important conversations are now emerging that relate to the social, political, cultural and environmental implications of this pandemic. Among them are two widely addressed, but rarely intersecting topics: environmental challenges and digital media. The first topic includes the links between ecosystem degradation and the rise of zoonotic disease transmission; or new understandings of ecological resilience and climate change mitigation, based on lessons learned during this pandemic. The second topic explores digital social phenomena, for instance, the rise of remote working, teleconferencing, online education, disease control through contact tracing apps and other digital tools; and the role of online communication in spreading information (and misinformation) about the pandemic.

While each topic has received media and scholarly attention, they have rarely been examined together, despite being deeply intertwined. For example, the lockdown has had a profound yet nebulous impact on the environment. The drop in air and motor travel has led to an unprecedented reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and dramatically improved air quality. At the same time, the increase in video-conferencing, streaming and cloud storage for personal and professional use has created strenuous demands on the capacity limits of broadband and mobile services. Tellingly, in March 2020, the European Commission had to place bandwidth limitations on streaming companies, to alleviate the strain and to protect the communication infrastructures. But what about people? The rapid expansion of digital infrastructures and technologies,

such as mobile phones and data farms, exposes their – now deemed 'essential'– workers to both the ruthlessness of global capitalism, and the virus itself. Same goes for the toxicity of rapidly growing e-waste: devices and gadgets, disposable by design, are poisoning lands and communities, already devastated by racism, settler-colonialism, imperialism and their extractive economies of profit before people. In the long run, the digital expansion, accelerated by COVID-19, will undoubtedly exacerbate the existing challenges of digital communication and digital divides, social inequality, environmental degradation and climate change.

This Special Issue comes to address this interrelatedness of the digital and the environmental, by considering the important relationships between digital media and communication technologies, environmental and social justice and the COVID-19 pandemic. We ask: What is the voice of critical environmental media studies, at the time when the digital disaster capitalism is booming, unchallenged and celebrated? How can we address media representations of the pandemic, the politics of information ecologies and the affective capacities of online sociality during COVID-19? How do we account for the hidden political and environmental dangers of rapid digitization, and for their uneven global distribution? How can we focus on environmental and social justice that is accountable to both human and non-human life, without privileging one over the other?

The Special Issue opens with Liu Xin's 'Screened screens screening: Boundaries and boundary-drawing practices during COVID-19'. This article contemplates the pandemic through a poetic-ethnographic exploration of the origins of 'media' and 'mediation': screens, screening and being screened. From screens to news media, Ram Awtar Yadav's 'Online environmental news stories in India during the COVID-19 pandemic: Reporting the "crisis" and "concerns" of the natural ecosystem' and Etsuko Kinefuchi's '"Nature is healing": Environmental infodemic and the pitfall of dualism' discuss the role of news coverage and misinformation in framing local and global environmental issues and concerns during COVID-19. The nature of fake environmental news and its digital proliferation is explored in Marcia Allison's '"So long, and thanks for all the fish!": Urban dolphins as ecofascist fake news during COVID-19', which documents viral fictions of urban biodiversity during the pandemic and their weaponization by far-right environmentalists. Thinking critically about the place of animal life in pandemic imagination, we move to Benjamin Schultz-Figueroa's 'Abandoned aquariums: Online animal attractions during quarantine', which looks at digitally mediated encounters with animals at the time of screen-dominated lockdown. The question of human–animal relations is also examined in 'Quarantine encounters with digital animals: More-than-human geographies of lockdown life' by Jonathon Turnbull, Adam Searle and William M Adams, with calls to reconsider how digitally mediated encounters may shape our human–animal relations after quarantine.

Xuefei Cao's article 'Futuristic media: A temporal reflection and eternal platform capitalism' takes a closer look at digital consumption during the pandemic, exploring human labour and the hidden environmental costs of platform capitalism. Mario Khreiche's 'The cost of labour and energy in digital media and automation technologies beyond the COVID-19 pandemic' details the diverse motivations towards automation and digital media during COVID-19. Our understanding of this invisible, but detrimental violence of pandemic digitization – in particular, for racialized workers, and subaltern and

disenfranchised communities and lands – is poignantly theorized by Miriyam Aouragh, Seda Gürses, Helen Pritchard and Femke Snelting in their article, 'The extractive infrastructures of contact tracing apps' through the notion of racial capitalism and extractive infrastructures.

Hayley Brazier's 'Disease, disaster and the internet: Reconceptualizing environmental hazards in the time of coronavirus' takes a somewhat different angle to examine media and data infrastructures during the pandemic. Brazier's piece focuses on data centres' vulnerability to viruses and microbes due to the heavy reliance on unprotected human labour, as well as on their complicity in the loss of habitat and biodiversity. Noting the links between COVID-19 and environmental degradation, and calling for the industry's environmental accountability, the piece is also haunted by a question of what might happen to digital communication, if the seamless operation of data centres ceases – if their workers get ill or die? Conversely, Becky Alexis-Martin's consideration of funeral environments 'Sensing the deathscape: Digital media and death during COVID-19' reflects upon novel and emerging digital deathscapes and makes visible the changing relations between the digital and the material in practices of digital mourning. The question of death is also addressed by Jin Haritaworn's '#NoGoingBack: Queer leaps at the intersection of protest and COVID-19'. This article provides a critical examination of the relationship between state racism, disaster capitalism and the racialized necropolitical distribution of life and death chances, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Haritaworn's piece ends with hope, opening up a radical collective imagination that is grounded in solidarity, justice and care. We conclude with Nadine Chan's precautionary consideration, 'Pandemic temporalities: Distal futurity in the digital Capitalocene'. Here, she argues for a new 'pandemic temporality', despite rapidly expanding virtual worlds that take us further away from kinship with our planet.

Collectively, the articles in this Special Issue make visible the ways in which digital media shapes how COVID-19 is experienced, perceived and responded to, as well as the effects of digital infrastructures on the environment. Importantly, this Special Issue contributes to the field of environmental media studies by underscoring the political, material and affective dimensions of the changing relation between, and confounding the strict demarcations of, the digital and the environmental.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Becky Alexis-Martin is a lecturer in Human Geography, with expertise in existential threats, digital geographies and cultural studies. Her first book *Disarming Doomsday* has been awarded the L.H.M. Ling Outstanding First Book Award.

Contact: Geography and Environment, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester M15 6LL, UK.

E-mail: B.Alexis-Martin@mmu.ac.uk

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8130-7543

Dr Adi Kuntsman is Reader in digital politics at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. Dr Kuntsman's current work focuses on selfies between political activism and biometric governance; the politics of 'opting out' of digital communication; and environmental damages of digital technologies. Dr Kuntsman is the author of *Figurations of Violence and Belonging: Queerness, Mingranthood and Nationalism in Cyberspace and beyond* (Peter Lang, 2009) and *Digital Militarism: Israeli Occupation in the Social Media Age* (co-authored with Rebecca L. Stein, Stanford University Press, 2014); the editor of *Selfie Citizenship* (Palgrave, 2017) and the co-editor of multiple collections and journal special issues.

Contact: Department of History, Politics and Philosophy, Geoffrey Manton Building, All Saints Campus, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester M15 6LL, UK.
E-mail: a.kuntsman@mmu.ac.uk
Web address: https://sites.google.com/site/adikuntsman/

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9970-9866

Liu Xin is a postdoctoral researcher at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki. Liu Xin has published in *Australian Feminist Studies, Parallax, MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture, Girlhood Studies, NORA, Nordic Journal of Migration Research, Sukupuolentutkimus-Genusforskning, Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics.* Her recent projects examine the phenomenon of air pollution in the Chinese context, the relation between ecology and economy and the reproduction of norms in digital games.

E-mail: xin.liu@helsinki.fi

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5772-6414