Editorial

Pandemedia
How Covid-19 has affected the role of media in society

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A time of crises

In the first months of 2020, news media began reporting on a hitherto unknown virus spreading in China. Within a few months, most of the world went into various forms of lockdown. A major crisis was upon us, affecting virtually all aspects of life. In many ways, we were already in a state of crisis before Covid-19, as climate change was, and still is, an epochal challenge to be dealt with. At the time of writing, late in 2022, Covid-19 in most countries is now considered a disease to be aware of, yet societal structures have mostly returned to normal. Still, the climate crisis is more prevalent than ever, just as the Russian invasion of Ukraine has shown how conflicts and crises in one part of the world have significant impact in other countries as well, and how one crisis follows after the next.

As such, the Covid-19 pandemic created awareness of what it meant to be situated in a global crisis, and it brought key pillars of society to the forefront of our attention. Suddenly, Zoom meetings were part of (and facilitators of) everyday conversations, and, by the same token, the lack of access to such tools for communication was evidence of global digital inequality. As Covid-19 restrictions are or have been lifted to different degrees in many countries, the time has come to discuss what we saw and what we learned from this specific period. The years from 2020 to 2022 have forced us to reorient ourselves, both in our personal lives and professionally.

As media and communication scholars, we have experienced how new approaches, uses, and domestications of ICT and media platforms have emerged, just as many of us for shorter or longer periods had to turn to digital tools to engage empirically with users, whom we would otherwise have observed or interviewed face to face in shared physical settings. The lockdowns and political recommendations of physical distance were a common denominator, which had significant impact on most people and led to new and creative forms of socialization and interaction, often distributed and spread through digital media.

Collective sessions where people were singing and making noise from their balconies were seen in several countries. In Denmark, the most watched TV show throughout the week was *Fællessang* (*Community Singing*), which aired on Friday evenings at eight, showing famous as well as ordinary people singing popular songs. School children across the world were sent home, some to online homeschooling of varying quality, some to nothing. In some countries (Spain, among others), children were not allowed to leave their homes for several weeks during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, which left them totally reliant on digital entertainment and communication. Examples of online activities such as birthday parties, streaming of concerts, funerals, debate sessions, etc., are numerous. Some of them are presented and analyzed in the articles in this special issue.

Another aspect of the pandemic has been challenges pertaining to mis- and disinformation. Groups and individuals used social media to bring broad medical consensus into question (Grimes, 2021). These counter-narratives of mis- and disinformation often concerned protective measures put in place, such as the use of surgical face masks (Lupton

& Willis, 2021), but they also created dangerous disputes over whether vaccines were safe and/or effective. Consequently, trust in public institutions was put to the test, revealing problems that had been building up before this particular crisis and perhaps with long-lasting or even permanent consequences regarding trust in democratic institutions (Jørgensen et al., 2022).

The pandemic also elucidated how the overall level of digitalisation in different countries strongly co-defined the opportunities different populations had for living a close-to-normal life during lockdowns. For instance, it was reported in Danish news media how school teachers in Germany had to use their private email accounts to communicate with students, since they did not have a shared, digital communication platform. This stood in stark contrast to how remote schooling took place in Denmark, where most children had their own laptop or tablet – many of those handed out by schools years ago – as much school work was already taking place using digital learning platforms. Even so, children in the Nordics had vastly different experiences of living in lockdowns, depending on the contexts and resources of their caretakers and communities. The pandemic emphasized social and economic differences around the globe and within populations.

This special issue of *MedieKultur* is by no means the first journal or edited volume with a focus on media and the pandemic. Several scholars have contributed to important and timely publications with a specific focus on the pandemic and/or with the pandemic as a backdrop or disturbance in their publication process (cf. Einav, 2021; Götz & Lemish, 2022; Katz & Bond, 2022; Lupton et al., 2021; Pollock & Vakoch, 2021). We find it relevant to continue to discuss how this specific period affected us on so many levels and not least to consider what we can learn from it and how we can move forward from it. This is the case for all the specific topics covered in this special issue, but also for more general aspects, such as research methodology and how research and researchers enter and affect public debates and policy.

The articles in this special issue are organized into two overall themes: 1) media production and media use in public settings, and 2) media use in private, everyday settings. First, two articles relate to journalistic practices, with Mona Solvoll, in "Framing the Covid-19 pandemic: A case study of the role of Norwegian public service broadcasting in times of crisis", focusing on how public service broadcasters in Norway covered the pandemic in news and debate programmes, and how they managed to address and inform about the health consequences of the pandemic, but to a lesser extent succeeded in creating a sense of community or "social glue" in the public. In the article, "Reporting like there was no pandemic: Cultural journalism during the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland, Sweden, and Latvia", Maarit Jaakkola and Ilva Skulte makes a comparative analysis of strategies in cultural journalism in Finland, Sweden, and Latvia in 2020–2021 and emphasizes how proactive approaches can function as a bridge between cultural journalism and the complex reality it reports on.

The cultural industry as such is the focus of Mona Khattab and Wessam Elmeligi's article, "Mediation and the PandeTheatre: Digital performativity in the smart staging of Brilliant Mind", in which they analyze how theatrical artforms had to make use of digital tools to create performances during the pandemic, thereby developing new approaches to affective involvement of audiences. In "Making (female) health care work matter: The performative publics of #systemrelevant during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany", Wolfgang Reißmann, Miriam Siemon, Margreth Lünenborg, and Christoph Raetzsch focus on how the hashtag #systemrelevant became relevant in a public discussion (on Twitter) about working conditions especially related to (female) healthcare workers. The article applies a practice-theory based approach and is a relevant example of how the pandemic shed light on societal structures in new ways.

The second part of this special issue zooms in on everyday life and how isolation and lockdown affected everyday practices in close relations. Stine Gotved, Hanna Gould, and Lisbeth Klastrup examine, in their article "Covid-19 and the mediatization of the funeral industry in Australia and Denmark", how the practical aspects of situations of grief and bereavement were carried out in Denmark and Australia, respectively, where not only local rules and restrictions, but also different levels of and adjustment to digital technologies played an important role. In Seraina Tarnutzer, Katharina Lobinger, and Federico Lucchesi's article, "Baked bunnies, couple selfies, and video-call gardening: Visual communication in couple relationships during COVID-19", visual, intimate communication in couples before, during, and after the pandemic is analyzed with a focus on how digital communication tools are used to strengthen and maintain relationships in the rhythm of everyday life. In "How TikTok served as a platform for young people to share and cope with lived COVID-19 experiences", Daniel Klug analyzes how TikTok users during times of lockdown and isolation made use of the platform to maintain contact with others and share their lived experiences of this period in their lives. And finally, Thomas Enemark Lundtofte and Stine Liv Johansen, in their article "Children's digital friendship practices during the first Covid-19 lockdown", analyze how children in different ages were (or were not) able to keep contact with their peers during the lockdowns in the spring of 2020.

With this special issue of *MedieKultur*, we aim to show how the Covid-19 crisis led to new discoveries, experiences, potentials, decisions, and shortcomings in relation to media technologies and practices. The contributions come from rather different perspectives in terms of research interest as well as methodology, but their findings paint a broad picture of the digital ecology we all inhabit in different ways. We are reminded of how media technologies function as the proverbial societal glue, and how challenging times seem to put this into perspective. Naturally, the publication of this special issue does not mark the end of Covid-19 as a global concern, but as the threat from this particular disease perhaps worries us less, we are reacquainted with much larger threats to our civilisation. Threats that will be discussed, disseminated, and overcome, also through use of media technologies.

Open section

In the open section of this issue, we present a study of how radio personalities display their professional and personal identities on social media. Drawing on Goffman's theater metaphor, Mardi Delport and Dalme Mulder analyze the strategic performances of radio personalities from a commercial radio station in South Africa in "Me, myself, I: Exploring radio personalities' display of identity on social media".

Book reviews

We have two book reviews in this issue. Penille Kærsmose Bøegh Rasmussen has reviewed *tumblr* (2021, Polity Books) by Tiidenberg, Hendry, and Abidin, detailing the rise of this microblogging and social network platform. Audun Engelstad has reviewed Gunhild Aggers' magnum opus *Det grænseløse tv-drama. Danskhed og transnationalitet* (2022, Samfundslitteratur, in Norwegian).

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