

Editorial

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The arrival of COVID-19 has reshaped capitalism and communication. Businesses reliant on human interactions and social circulation—hospitality, tourism, shopping—struggled or disappeared. Meanwhile, successful businesses built upon information-communication infrastructures have survived and prospered. Tech and tech-retail behemoths—Alphabet/Google, Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Apple, Alibaba, Ten Cent—profited from the pandemic. Businesses, governments, public institutions, workers, students and consumers increasingly relied upon online communication networks. The broader networks of capitalism, though, have been disrupted, with national and international quarantines restricting cross-border flows, air travel dwindling, container ships clogging port entrances, queues of lorries waiting for drivers and retailers running short of product lines. In short, global capitalism’s transport and supply chains have slowed down.

In these circumstances, subsequent articles discuss the impact of COVID-19 on political economies of communication. Mark Andrejevic and Zala Volcic remind us that capitalism, communication and surveillance are integrally connected. In the United States, they argue, the mobilisation of digital monitoring and tracking technology in response to COVID-19 extended established surveillance practices. Social media business models, for example, already allowed user behaviour to be monitored, individuated and monetised. Under pandemic conditions, monitoring virus carriers requires the real-time tracking of social circulation, detection of COVID symptoms from a distance, intensive quarantine restrictions and, most recently, verification of vaccine status. Here, the technological affordances were, and are, biometric identification, automated collection of relevant data and algorithmic data analysis. For Andrejevic and Volcic, comprehensive social surveillance is imperative and understandable—the COVID-19 virus threatens human sociality as such. There are disturbing consequences, however. Constant, pervasive and environmental surveillance potentially undermines social trust and social interdependence. Beyond the pandemic, in the absence of a public health emergency, surveillance capitalism and the surveillance state will

not retreat. For those proponents of freedom and autonomy previously opposed to anti-COVID vaccines, unaccountable power will be read as confirmation of conspiratorial rule.

As COVID-19 extended and refined the panoply of surveillance, political economies of media-sport were threatened. If top athletes could not circulate or perform, the cancellation of major sporting events would damage the revenues of sports organisations, television networks and advertisers. In this respect, Jennifer Proffit, Nivia Salazar, Julian Cortese and Patrick Merle detail the travails of full combat sports entertainment in the United States. During April and May 2020, as COVID-19 spread rapidly, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) and World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) sought to organise live events. Over the same period, the Tokyo Olympics, French Tennis Open and U.S. Master's Golf were postponed and Wimbledon 2020 cancelled. The push to resume U.S. combat sports entertainment amidst a worsening pandemic came from sports franchise owners, media corporations and individual politicians. The prospect of enormous revenue losses brought these vested interests together. The authors point out that Donald Trump, an avid fan of WWE events, promoted an immediate reopening after the initial cancellations. On April 9, Florida Governor Ron De Santis, an ardent Trump supporter, deemed WWE an "essential business", heedless of the fact that two employees had tested positive. The owners of WWE, Vince and Linda McMahon, were longstanding supporters of the Trump Foundation. Similarly, Dana White, USC president and Trump supporter, decided in May 2020 to hold three pay-for-view events, even though three performers were already infected with the virus. These and other cited examples suggest that the return to live combats sports events was not just revenue-driven. Also critical was the collusion between franchise owners and political leaders wanting to restart business activity regardless of the pandemic. Here, the authors note that ESPN Sports, a subsidiary of Disney Corporation, were reluctant to reopen live events. Avoidable contagion and unnecessary suffering could damage the parent brand.

COVID-19 also threatens news media organisations and journalistic practices. In the case of Nigeria, viral spread, lockdowns and food shortages combined with police corruption and brutality triggered nationwide protests and opportunistic criminal activity. Fatima Abubakre's account of the turmoil draws upon testimonies from mid-management staff and newsroom heads across six elite newspapers. Interviews were initially conducted during April 2020, two weeks after a government-declared lockdown. Follow-up interviews during the last two weeks of October, after the lockdown, coincided with growing protests against the police and government. In April, respondents told a story of staff layoffs, insolvency, reduced advertising and shorter editions. Skeleton staff working mostly from home depended upon official news wires and social media information streams, especially Twitter. In October, respondents recalled the revenue declines and staff losses of

previous months. Concerns about the sustainability of news journalism were openly expressed. The anti-police and anti-government protests were seen to highlight lockdown injustices—uneven food distribution from warehouses and minimal welfare provision for the poor. Aside from these difficulties, Abubakre also records an impressive commitment to duty. Respondents understood that scrutinising government actions on public behalf was a moral imperative.

Clearly, the global pandemic has had distinctive repercussions in particular countries. Nationally mediated political events can arise and unfold unexpectedly. In South Africa, Ruth Teer-Tomaselli's shows that news coverage of the COVID-19 lockdown from March 2020 was dominated by three major controversies: brutal enforcement tactics by the South African police and national defence units; government prohibitions of alcohol and tobacco sales; and the deployment of Cuban medical staff to support anti-pandemic health programmes. These were the findings of a content analysis involving two aggregated news sites: News24.com and the South African Independent Online (IOL). Teer-Tomaselli's research represents a historical snapshot of how pandemic-related events played out across the South African media domain.

In the commentary section, Victor Pickard investigates the plight of commercial journalism in the United States. Financialised media ownership, the social media siphoning of advertising revenue and the pandemic's impact on newsgathering has erased local journalism and created regional news deserts. These conditions nurtured the irrationalist and neo-fascist sentiments which flowered during the Trump presidency. In response, Pickard maps the institutional contours of a post-commercial, publicly funded media system. Benedetta Brevini depicts the Australian 2021 News Media Bargaining Code as a collusive deal between Digital Lords (Facebook, Alphabet-Google) and Media Lords (Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, Nine and Seven West Media). The purpose was to allow publishers and designated digital platforms to negotiate financial remuneration concerning social media's use of news content. Brevini points out that small, local and independent media entities are excluded from the code and that public interest journalism remains in crisis. Russell Newman's review of Frank Pasquaes' *New Laws of Robotics: Defending Human Experience in the Age of AI* is especially pertinent right now. Global pandemics do not prevent, and may even facilitate, the advancement of AI as the technological infrastructure of capitalism.

Finally, a note for current and retrospective readers. Everyone involved in this COVID-themed issue was affected in some way by the pandemic. The very fact of publication signals the resilience of public sphere principles.