



Covid-19: The cultural constructions of a global crisis

Paul Frosh 

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Myria Georgiou 

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Abstract

This is the Introduction to the special issue on Covid-19 and the cultural constructions of a global crisis. Contextualizing understandings of the pandemic in relation to the concepts of ‘event’ and ‘crisis’, especially to the idea that modernity is itself a condition of perpetual crisis, it proposes that the pandemic is a crisis-event that catalyses new possibilities for making visible endemic inequalities and injustices across highly variable cultural and social domains, from the personal to the global. Always open to containment and appropriation, this crisis of visibility and invisibility is discussed as it pertains to the body, to space and social proximity, and to media and mediation. The individual contributions to the special issue are introduced in relation to these topics.

Keywords

Covid-19, crisis, event, global, pandemic

Introduction to the Special Issue on Covid-19 as a global crisis

What is the meaning of the Coronavirus pandemic as a global crisis? Or, to unpack this somewhat naïve question: what does such a crisis feel, look like and signify to those living through it? How are its legibility, coherence, and significance as a ‘crisis’

Corresponding author:

Paul Frosh, Department of Communication and Journalism, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel.

Email: paul.frosh@mail.huji.ac.il

constructed and performed across highly variable cultural and social contexts? How does its occurrence maintain, amplify or transform cultural practices, representational repertoires, solidarities and power relations? And how can inquiry into something as vast, multifarious and pervasive as the pandemic generate new theory about the cultural construction of 'crisis' in our time – particularly since, at the moment of writing, it is still going on? In short, how might we address both the intensely particular manifestations of Covid-19 in different locations, times and populations, and yet grasp its totality as a global phenomenon?

Calling the pandemic a 'crisis' draws it firmly into the orbit of cultural studies in two primary ways, which can be summarized through two interconnected questions. First, how is Covid-19 constructed, produced and reproduced as a particular kind of event, and specifically *as* a crisis? Second, what is the pandemic a crisis *of*?

Why now?

Describing Covid-19 as a crisis seems an almost natural statement of fact, a designation so obvious and unremarkable (unlike the pandemic itself) as to raise no difficulties: just as one can say 'the Covid pandemic' in everyday conversation, one can also say 'the Covid crisis' without provoking surprise or disagreement.

The self-evidence of such discourse is, of course, precisely the kind of condition to attract the suspicion of cultural studies scholars. And indeed, on closer inspection, several assumptions and challenges do present themselves, potentially complicating but also enriching our understanding of Covid-19 as a political-cultural phenomenon, and of the terminology we bring to its analysis.

The first assumption is that Covid-19 is a momentous enough phenomenon to be considered a (historical) event, and as such is also worthy of our attention for its overall significance to lives and societies beyond the particular experiences of those living through it. Moreover, it assumes that we can appreciate and grasp such possible significance while the pandemic is still going on. It might seem strange to question these assumptions at the time of writing, where signs of Covid-19's importance and impact are ubiquitous for many, if not most, populations (though the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has certainly moved it down the news agenda in many places). Nevertheless, the idea that we can find much of lasting value to say about events as they are happening has been a matter of contention, certainly in the study of history. For instance, the analysis of Covid-19 as an event, while it is still going on, would probably have irritated Fernand Braudel: 'An event is an explosion.... Amid its deceptive smoke, it fills the conscious domain of today's people, but it doesn't last long, disappearing almost as soon as one sees its flame' (Braudel and Wallerstein, 2009: 174). As we write, the pandemic is smoking still, its flame casting shadows across the 'conscious domains' of billions of people around the world. Its epidemiological scope, based on existing information, reaches to an estimated 443,896,445 cases worldwide, 5,990,878 deaths, and only a handful of countries which seem to have been spared (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource, consulted on 5.3.22, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>). Named Covid-19 by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 February 2020, the disease's biological origins are somewhat murky, depending in part on the credence one gives to

reports from the Chinese government and Chinese health experts on the one hand, and to conspiracy theories on the other (with a range of options in between), though there is an emerging consensus that the SARS-CoV-2 virus which causes the disease infected humans after they came into contact with an animal carrier in the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan.

Given the partial character of the information about the disease's origins, uncertainty about its future development, and its continuing diffusion around the world, Braudel's imagined irritation would appear to be justified. Surely the significance of an event can only be seriously examined once the event has ended, and when distance in time enables a more complete and measured assessment? The perspective afforded by temporal distance seems all the more essential when the event in question is as globally extensive, multifarious and socially pervasive as the Covid-19 pandemic. Only with the benefit of hindsight, one supposes, can the most important perspectives, attributes and episodes be sifted from the vast array of impressions and epiphenomena associated with it, and the event placed within the medium-term cycles and longer-term structures of human (and organic) history.

Braudel's scholarly aversion was less to events per se, but to their privileged position as the main research objects of a mode of historical inquiry that focused on 'the short term' (a phrase he preferred). His criticisms of event-based 'history in the making', and his promotion of the cyclical 'conjuncture' and, especially, the slow-moving edifices of the *longue-durée*, were responses to the historiographical approaches of his time (and of the nineteenth century), and his claims have certainly been challenged within the study of history itself.¹ Nevertheless, the question remains: what can one learn about, and particularly from, such a widespread and diffuse event *while it is still taking place?*

Perhaps counter-intuitively, Braudel supplies an answer. We can learn a lot about the 'conscious domain' that the event fills with its flame. Drawn to its heat and light, this special issue seeks to access those conscious domains, which we can also call 'culture': we understand Covid-19 as *culturally produced global phenomenon*. For example, officially naming the virus and the disease, and declaring it a pandemic on 12 March 2020, were overtly cultural acts: declarative speech acts with performative force, executed by an institutional authority (the WHO), that created objects of knowledge and invoked protocols for action about them (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1976). Moreover, the legibility and meaning of Covid-19 to those living through it relies on its cultural construction *as a crisis*, in particular through the *performative and representational work of media* that make certain elements of the pandemic visible and others invisible (Roitman, 2013), as they operate locally and globally and at multiple scales (from the personal to the macro-social and infrastructural).

The cultural construction of the crisis is not uniform: this is a basic premise of this special issue. Yet, at the risk of making an unreflexively 'presentist' observation (Hartog, 2003), it seems to possess distinctive temporal and spatial parameters. As a moment in time, it is distinguished from a remembered 'before' and an anxiously projected 'after' – a 'space of experience' and a 'horizon of expectation' (Koselleck, 2004). This 'before' and 'after' form a plane of suspended temporal continuity that the pandemic, as an extra-ordinary event, has interrupted or potentially transformed, raising the question of whether there will indeed *be* an 'after', or whether living with

the virus will become the ‘new normal’. No less compellingly, the pandemic’s spatial parameters place it within a small but existentially momentous group of events for which there appears to be no ‘outside’, at least not for currently living human beings: very few populations in the world who have not been suddenly, and visibly, affected, even if it is only by the knowledge – made available through media – that the crisis is affecting everyone else.

There are therefore good reasons to proceed with an examination of the pandemic during, or near, the time of its occurrence. Doing so enables proximity to cultural experiences and expressions as these are manifested from ‘inside’ its duration, thereby foregrounding the ‘restlessness’ (Wagner-Pacifici, 2010, 2017) of the event as a fluctuating cultural configuration, rather than its presumed stability and uniformity. The timeliness of such an investigation gives access to the pandemic’s *historicity*, to its character as a formation unfolding in time which has a particular dynamic structure and appearance – a set of shifting characteristics and manifestations – to those living through it, that is difficult to reconstruct in retrospect. Indeed, not all of these manifestations will necessarily remain salient or even visible over the long term, and this may be *despite* their importance to the event’s evolution and ramifications.

Events as form and flow

How, then, might we meaningfully conceptualize Covid-19 as an ‘event’? Definitions of events and evaluations of them vary greatly both within and between diverse disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. In historical studies the concept of the event has a particularly turbulent past (Santamaria and Bailey, 1984), already invoked in our discussion of Braudel; its denigration has been significantly reversed, in part thanks to the ‘narrative turn’ in late 20th-century historiography (White, 1987). Additionally, the event has been extensively theorized in philosophical work, most prominently among ‘continental’ philosophers (e.g. Badiou, 2005; Deleuze, 1990; Romano, 2009). At the risk of grossly reducing this complex body of thought, we can summarize several common propositions: the event is a sign of transformative becoming and emergence; events are not reducible to a cause or causes, but are bifurcation points or nodes in causal relations; events are singularities that cannot be repeated identically; events form and transform the historical being of subjects and collectivities (Takács, 2015). A key caveat in understanding this summary is that it reproduces a frequently encountered conceptual elision in writing about ‘the event’: the tendency for ‘event’ to be used as a shorthand for ‘*historical* event’, where the modifier ‘historical’ means more than ‘occurring in history’ but suggests historical consequence: that is, meaning by virtue of significant social and political change. This elision is important since it connects theories of the event to the discussion of ‘crisis’ later in this Introduction.

Events have faced slightly less turbulent treatment in the social sciences. In sociology, the most significant recent contribution to the theorization of events has been made by Robin Wagner-Pacifici (2017). Indebted to the philosophical work described above, Wagner-Pacifici foregrounds the simultaneously ruptural, singular quality of events, and their unpredictable and uneven unfolding in time, while at the same time arguing for their recognizability and narratability *as* events, as bounded or marked iterations

whose attributes of ‘eventness’ *can* be generalized beyond each particular occurrence. At the heart of Wagner-Pacifci’s approach is a recognition of ‘the *ongoingness* of events, the ways they are restless and the ways they are subject to continuing oscillations between bounding and unbounding as they extend in time and space’ Wagner-Pacifci (2017: 5).

Wagner-Pacifci also proposes a flexible model for analysing ‘eventness’ as a dialectical movement between events’ iterable ‘form’ and the ‘flow’ of their volatile emergence and mutation. This model has three features that work together to shape and mobilize events. The first is *performative*: in an example we have already given, Covid-19 is declared ‘a pandemic’, a speech act which not only names it as a particular object but activates related programmes for action about it, thereby effecting a change in the world. The second is *demonstrative*, a deictic mode of reference that highlights context-dependent relations and provides orientation to an event. You browse headlines on the BBC website, and are told that ‘Spain is seeing a new wave’ and that ‘South Korea sees biggest virus spike since March’. You are thereby oriented in relation to these nations and times and included within the event’s globality. Crucially, this orientation is produced against – and reinforces – a contextual interpretive horizon which does *not* need to be explicitly mentioned since it is assumed as shared background knowledge. A new wave of *what*? A spike in *which* virus? You do not need to be told. The demonstrative feature orients you to the pandemic as an event so broadly comprehended (as ‘the context’) that it can remain unmentioned. The final aspect of the model is *representational*: repertoires of visual images, documents and verbal tropes (such as the use of the term ‘waves’ in English to describe outbreaks of the pandemic) that signify the event and also enable it to travel across space and time. Photographs of people in public wearing surgical masks, video clips of city centres depopulated (or overrun with animals) during quarantine, news footage of demonstrations against vaccination and social distancing policies, and infographics showing statistics of the disease’s spread (Sonnevend, 2020): these all serve both to sculpt the *form* of the event and to facilitate its *flow* across temporal and spatial distances.

Crisis, visibility, globality

What, however, does calling the pandemic a ‘*crisis*’ imply? While both events and crises are culturally constructed, not every event is produced or perceived as a crisis, though many of the scholars we have mentioned, including Wagner-Pacifci, frequently merge the two in reference to ‘historical events’. Unlike ‘event’, however, crisis as a *general concept* has not been the object of a great deal of systematic theorizing (Roitman, 2013: this is in distinction to the traits of *particular* kinds of crisis, for instance in economics or politics, or when applied to organizations, as in crisis management). One of the few historical thinkers to have engaged systematically with the term is Reinhart Koselleck, who charts the historical development of ‘crisis’ as a concept *of* history. Derived from the classical Greek for to ‘separate’, ‘judge’, and ‘decide’, and with a central role in politics and law, the word – appropriately, given the context of the Covid-19 pandemic – also became important in medicine (Koselleck, 2006). It denoted an isolable and pivotal moment in the condition of a disease that could lead to either death or recovery, and that required ‘critical’ (from the same root) discourse, analysis

and assessment, and the taking of decisions of the utmost urgency and seriousness. Crisis, then, is a state of discernible existential precariousness that calls for time-sensitive human judgement and extraordinary responsive action (Doane, 1990). As the term develops in the West it also acquires an important (Christian) religious dimension in relation to judgement and salvation, which from the late 18th century is secularized (without losing its apocalyptic associations) as a philosophy of history and of historical possibility and change. From this point 'the concept of crisis can generalize the modern experience to such an extent that "crisis" becomes a permanent concept of "history"' (Koselleck, 2006: 371). Overall, Koselleck offers four mutually reinforcing meanings of the modern concept of crisis: (1) a chain of events leading to a decisive moment requiring action, (2) a unique and final point in time after which history will have forever changed, (3) a permanent critical state which may constantly recur, (4) a historically immanent transitional phase.

Among the consequences of this complex semantic field is the powerful perception that the modern era is constituted as a time of *permanent* crisis. Crisis is therefore not merely an 'event' in the ruptural sense described earlier, but a new ground for thinking about such events. Comprising an intensified amalgam of latency and contingency, it serves a 'regime of historicity' (Hartog, 2003) which underpins the very idea that irruptive and transformative events are always potentially *about to* occur. The word 'emergent' nicely encapsulates this orientation to transformation that is anticipated, unpredictable, and not yet fully formed. Significantly, this idea of crisis as a defining characteristic of modern historical consciousness is strongly connected to the temporal dynamics of modernity (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1990): its valorization of change, its orientation to futurity, and its fixation on the present as the moment of possibility for abrupt, wholesale transformation of self and world.

At the same time, the concept of crisis has not been deprived of its particularity. As Janet Roitman reminds us, the word is ubiquitous as a noun in writings about a range of past and present conditions (economic crisis, environmental crisis, political crisis, humanitarian crisis, social crisis, etc. – one might add 'mid-life crisis'). It 'is mobilized as the defining category of historical situations, past and present. The recent bibliography in the social sciences and popular press is vast; crisis texts are a veritable industry' (Roitman, 2013: 3). What then, to bring Wagner-Pacifici back into the discussion, could mark crisis *as an event* in an era in which crisis is understood to be a permanent state of affairs, or has become, even, routine (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009)? What might nevertheless characterize the 'eventness' of a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic, its 'crisis-ness'?

One key parameter for theorizing both contemporary crisis and for exploring the pandemic as a cultural crisis is *visibility*: visibility as an explosive moment (recall Braudel's metaphor) of sudden exposure and disclosure to view. Crisis makes visible, suddenly and intensively, the usually unnoticed structures, hierarchies and norms of everyday life-worlds and socio-political formations.

Visibility is of course in part a metaphor (Thompson, 2005). It joins a long list of visual and optical metaphors that pervade Western philosophical, humanistic and social scientific discourse (Mitchell, 1986), as well as everyday expression in many languages. Applied to crisis, the metaphorical force of visibility draws on different

conceptualizations of how everyday behaviour and interaction are socially scripted, and how sensory life is politically ordered. Sociologically, it brings into view what Garfinkel calls ‘the socially standardized and standardizing “seen but unnoticed”, expected, background features of everyday scenes’ (1964: 226), which can be revealed through deliberate disruptions, as in his famous ethnomethodological ‘breaching experiments’ (one could conceptualize the pandemic itself as one gargantuan breaching experiment, cruelly inflicted on the world’s population). Aesthetically, crisis magnifies, makes bare and potentially rearranges the ‘scopic regimes’ (Jay, 1988) governing which objects and subjects are systematically shown or hidden in a given society, and exposes the aesthetic structures through which the ‘distribution of the sensible’ is politically organized (Rancière, 2004). Phenomenologically, visibility through crisis can lead to ‘reflexive world-disclosure’, a decentring revelation of the background conditions by which our worlds are pre-interpreted, made routinely intelligible and naturalized as ‘given’: disclosure ‘always arises from a critical impulse, from consciousness of disturbance, from breakdown, crisis’ (Kompridis, 2006: 35–6). Such moments of abrupt disjunction and revelation foreground the existential dimensions and political stakes of contemporary life.

Yet visibility is historically apposite to the pandemic in a less metaphorical sense. For all the theoretical and historical caveats of visual culture scholars (Mitchell, 2005), contemporary communication technologies have made images and visual media among the pre-eminent cultural forms through which self and other, individual and collective, reality and dream, event and memory, are given to perception, feeling, understanding and imagination. Whether we prefer to speak positively of an ‘abundance’ of images and visual media (Hariman and Lucaites, 2016), or cry out against an image ‘deluge’, we do live in a time of widespread belief that images are everywhere, all the time, in ways that are historically unparalleled (Bredenkamp, 2018). We can therefore approach contemporary crisis as an event in which the sudden visibility of the conditions of life is overtly enabled by an actualization, via images and media, of *vision as a perceptual and cultural power*. Through such visibility, the conspicuousness of seemingly underlying forces is agitated and intensified to a point at which scrutiny, intervention and change become necessary and, as a result, imaginable and possible. The visibility born of crisis privileges and demands agency over structures.

This alliance between visibility as metaphor and visual media as ubiquitous forces raises an important question: to whom are things made visible by crisis? After all, there is no shortage of critical exposés of the ideological power of images to hide or naturalize power relations. And concepts such as ‘scopic regime’ and ‘distribution of the sensible’ are based on the proposition that visibility is always structured in relation to invisibility as a fundamental political operation. If crisis renders the unseen visible and the unnoticed conspicuous, to whom does it do so, and what nevertheless remains invisible?

There are at least two possible responses to this. The first is that crisis makes visible *multi-perspectivally*. What it makes visible depends on the position of observers: their locations, histories, cultural identities, political contexts. This does not mean, however, that there is no pattern to this multiplicity of exposures. Crisis makes possible (but does not guarantee) transformative change based on perceptual change: if, as Hall (1977) argued, hegemony is ‘structured in dominance’, one could postulate that crisis

is 'structured in opposition'. In every location one would expect crisis to present, *widely and intensively*, perspectives and phenomena that were previously marginalized. Hence, it is also likely that such 'new' perspectives will long have been highly visible and completely obvious to populations who experience their own social and political positions as peripheral, overlooked and repressed by centres of power.

The second response concerns the *global scale* of Covid-19 as a cultural crisis. This globality is also understood as a construction, connected to the pandemic's pervasive and extensive reach. Covid-19 is *pervasive* in that its influence plays out at virtually all scales of life, from the individual body and immediate physical interactions and personal mobility, to relations between social and cultural groups, states, national economies, the activities of transnational entities such as corporations and international organizations, as well as through observable shifts in the environmental impact of human behaviour. The crisis is *extensive* not only in that it is experienced, performed and represented as a variable *local* phenomenon in virtually every humanly inhabited part of the world, but also that it is widely perceived and depicted in these places *as global*, as something affecting everyone, no matter where they live, at this very time. Media are central to this simultaneous pervasiveness and extensiveness, since contemporary media technologies are *also* profoundly and almost ubiquitously embedded into the social world at small and large scales, from the intimate everyday lives of individuals to global infrastructures (Couldry and Hepp, 2017). This powerful historical contingency generates a formal and substantive affinity between the pandemic, on the one hand, and the mechanisms of its cultural mediation. The reverberations of this affinity are multiple and mutual.

The content of crisis: body, space, media

If visibility characterizes the cultural form of crisis, what is Covid-19 a crisis *of*? This is difficult to delimit, but it appears to constitute a *meta-crisis*, a *crisis-event* which makes visible modernity's general historical character as a perpetual *crisis-condition*. As such it reveals and catalyses pre-existing potentialities for catastrophe or transformation, enabling the widespread visibility of conflicts which were already endemic: systemic crises of wealth and welfare inequality, scientific expertise, knowledge and truth (the 'infodemic'), political leadership, racial discrimination, domestic violence, social isolation, mediation and civility, migration and borders, religious faith, moral care, and environmental disaster. It is a crisis of the universality of risk, its inequitable distribution globally and locally, and of our capacities to reflect upon and develop a politics capable of addressing it (Beck, 1992). For vast numbers it is a personal and collective anxiety, of varying intensity, about their, and their world's, immediate and longer-term future. For many it is also of course a personal crisis of life and death, debilitating illness, severe economic and social loss, and bereavement. It is experienced by and represented to billions of people as a time of immense danger and disruption, both for their individual lives and for their collective ways of life.

Assuming that the primary 'formal' domain of crisis as a concept is historical time, we can approach the 'content' of the Covid-19 crisis via three main premises, concerning the body, space, and media. The first premise is that the biological qualities of Coronavirus

produces a crisis of visibility and invisibility *at the level of the individual body*. In part this is true of all such diseases of course: the virus is invisible to the human eye. However, this particular disease's swift transmissibility, comparatively long incubation period (the time between exposure and the onset of symptoms), and high proportion of very mild or asymptomatic infections – all combined with its deadly risks for certain populations – created an experiential and forensic crisis for one's own bodily experience and body-consciousness (How does one know if they are sick when having no symptoms? What does it mean to be ill but not to *feel* ill?). This crisis of body-consciousness is partly manifested through the potential gaps between sensations associated with illness and the visible outputs produced by technological self-monitoring via a range of devices and procedures (some more reliable than others), particularly in an era in which both the technical possibilities and cultural imperatives for self-monitoring (for health and other purposes) have greatly expanded as a result of digital and mobile technologies (Crawford et al., 2015; Lupton, 2012; Sanders, 2017). It is also forcefully materialized by the centrality of the face mask (Lynteris, 2018). This produces the potential paradox of a crisis of visibility being symbolized by the partial covering of *the face*, which is itself one of the most culturally complex, polysemic and psychosocially significant 'media' between the embodied self and the world (Pearl, 2010, 2017); in line with this complexity the meanings of masks and face coverings are also subject to wide historical and cultural variation (Mauss, 1985 [1938]; Riisgaard and Thomassen, 2016). Beyond one's own body, the disease has also resulted in a crisis of interaction with others in physical space who may be *invisibly* infected. This interactional aspect of physical crisis is connected to the regulation of norms within what some have called Covid capitalism (Fuchs, 2020): heightened awareness of the individual body as both potentially infectious and precious, regulated public proximity (e.g. keeping 2 metres distance), but also unequal distribution of measures of protection. The contradictory and often antagonistic awareness of certain bodies that need protection, and others that are to be feared, has been exacerbated through broader infrastructures for social 'interveillance' (Jansson, 2015) and governmental surveillance and regulation (Silva, 2021; Staples, 2014), again especially as performed via new technological systems and devices (e.g. surveillance cameras, Apps, location monitoring through cellphone signals).

To state the premise more theoretically, the crisis of visibility at the level of the body in Covid-19 is also a crisis of the embodied self as a site of intersection for the three key modalities of modern power as formulated by Foucault (1990, 2004): sovereign power, disciplinary power and biopower. *Sovereign* power to make laws and regulate behaviour through punishment; *disciplinary* power over individual bodies through the internalization of behavioural norms which are subject to state surveillance and the scrutiny of one's peers; *biopower* as the (attempt to) regulate for a (fragile) equilibrium of entire populations through the unequally imposed control of biological processes. All have been brought into conspicuous view by the pandemic: governments closing borders, private citizens enforcing social distance rules on wayward individuals, and the vast biopolitical edifices of the state being brought into the light through the continual presentation of statistical analyses and epidemiological concepts (and controversies) in the news. Each of these, and their intersections, has been openly and continually challenged in different parts of the world, including by political leaderships tasked with

enacting them, and their ‘virulent forms of racialization’ (Erni and Striphas, 2021: 221) in conjuncture with ‘necropopulist’ (Bratich, 2021), ‘post-truth’ and toxic storytelling (Harsin, 2020) of the crisis. The case of biopower is perhaps most compelling, particularly around the question of race. Biopower’s particular goal is to govern life, to let live. How can such a power also then ‘let die’? Race, for Foucault, was the fault line across which this distinction became ‘inscribed in the mechanism of the state’ (Foucault, 2004: 254). The widely reported and discussed differences in Covid-19 mortality rates between privileged and underprivileged racial and ethnic groups, from Black and white Americans, to populations of the Global North and South, opened up to view the social, economic, political and overall *life* inequities through which biopower operates. At these times of crisis, the lives of certain populations became equal to ‘racial contagion’ (as in the case of Asian Americans, see Mallapragada, 2021), and the lives of racialized minorities disproportionately lost in Western metropolises – stark reminders of deep and long-standing structural racism (Clarke, 2021).

The second premise is that the pandemic is experienced, performed and represented as a *spatial* crisis. The biological attributes of the disease were met with a series of highly visible public health responses that quickly gave rise to radical alterations in the organization of physical and social space. The most prevalent themes in this crisis revolve around physical confinement and the regulation of publicness. Confinement under Covid-19 showed the intricate intersections of spatial scale, produced according to a nested or ‘capsular’ model that can be mapped as concentric circles (Herod, 2011), Russian doll-like, from the micro to the macro and back again: individual confinement in a single room of a house for someone in quarantine, to household confinement, to neighbourhood lockdowns, to the enforcement of travel restrictions within the borders of whole countries, to the closing of national borders and the cessation of international travel altogether. These top-down scalar orders of confinement were effectively border-securing and policing operations (including the self-policing accompanying self-isolation in a shared household), and in many cases also dramatic procedures of eviction, exclusion and expulsion, particularly for migrants and refugees, either forcibly confined in camps or denied asylum altogether as processes of asylum became suspended (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2022; Opratko et al., 2021). In these circumstances ‘mobility’, was assumed by the privileged through choice, and ‘suspension’ was imposed on the powerless by force, as many of those denied mobility, such as refugees and migrants, were seen as inherent threats to the stable ordering of the space of crisis. All of these operations were not just experienced, but became overt topics of Covid ‘zombie capitalism’ (Gonzaga, 2021) media representations: unravelling, on the one hand, in dystopic images of depopulated public spaces (empty city streets, malls, empty beaches, empty airports, empty stadiums), and panicking narratives of contagious migrants on the other, all of which exacerbated biopolitical nationalism’s (Kloet, Lin and Chow, 2020) border closures, violent policing of protests, and, inevitably, the desperation of expelled, evicted or stranded groups.

Shifts in proximity regulations were also connected to this confinement regime. But rather than top-down ordering through scale, these were concerned with the interactions between bodies in different spaces of confinement. In household spaces and other authorized ‘bubbles’ or ‘capsules’, proximity remained relatively unregulated (except in the

case of infection). In public spaces a range of proximity-regulating techniques were developed: explicit recommendations or rules for minimum distance (1 metre, 2 metres, 6 feet), floor markers signalling minimum distances in open and closed locations (including for protests), barriers at the entrances to premises and between workspaces in premises, empty seats in fixed-row auditoriums, etc. These techniques for regulating proximity were based on the *quantification* of everyday space, both through physical markers or in ways that sought to imbue an embodied awareness of the technical measure of distance required to mitigate transmission of the virus. Other techniques sought to work directly on this awareness through the inculcation of new gestural forms of greeting that enabled increase in distance without violating ‘proxemic’ norms of communication achieved through closeness to others (Hall, 1966): the elbow greeting and the formal bow replacing handshakes, hugs and kisses. Again, all of these techniques for regulating proximity were highly visible, often questioned, contested or simply ignored (including by political leaders), and all were incorporated into widely circulated images that came to signal, and stand for, the pandemic as a crisis of lived spatial relations.

The third premise is that the crisis is one of culture and particularly of *media and mediation*. Media are significant because the catalysing and transformative potential of pandemics for societies is not historically new (Evans, 1988; Herlihy, 1997; Levina, 2012; Slack, 1988, 2012). What *is* novel is the combination of global *extensiveness* with media *pervasiveness* in the cultural performance and representation of the pandemic to many of those living through it, as we suggested earlier. Three areas of cultural and media research underpin this idea: media representation and cultural memory, replication and dissemination through media, and ‘mediatization’ as a key process in contemporary social life. Media representation returns us to the legibility of new events, particularly *as* crises, which is shaped by the cultural memory of previous events (Assmann, 2011; Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995): as Samman puts it, ‘crisis-histories feed on crisis-histories’ (Samman, 2015: 979). Memories of such events ‘travel’ (Erll, 2011) via media across continents and generations, producing national and transnational memory structures for the depiction and understanding of new occurrences in new contexts (Levy and Sznajder, 2006; Neiger et al., 2011). Cultural memory of the flu pandemic of 1918–20 is a much-touted example in the current crisis, especially for North Americans and Western Europeans. Yet the mediations of the past are never sufficient to accommodate the contingencies of the present, creating tensions with globally diverse and even ‘disjunctural’ pasts that may have been unattended to in dominant cultural frameworks. Recovered and modified in the wake of a present crisis, these can give rise to cultural ‘imaginaries’ of different possible futures (Briggs et al., 2020; Kay and Wood, 2020).

The technological *forms* in which media replicate and disseminate representations are also central to the experience of crisis. The ‘viral’ (how bitterly apposite that word has become) and ‘memetic’ (Shifman, 2014) replication and dissemination of ‘user-generated’ cultural texts via the internet, social media platforms, and through mobile devices, have become staples in controversy between technological optimists and sceptics within media studies (Benkler, 2006; Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Jenkins, 2006), as has the cultural value of the mass participation of ordinary users in their production and

distribution. Few deny however that the contemporary production and circulation of cultural objects is in key respects far less centralized and predictable than in the 20th-century mass-media system. With regard to crisis this means that visibility becomes difficult to control: crisis images ‘from below’, taken with smartphone cameras, *can* be distributed globally against the wishes of political authorities, augmented in turn by conventional news media when they too take up and re-distribute these ‘vernacular’ objects. A case in point is the smartphone camera footage of the killing of George Floyd. An additional point is worth mentioning here: these media images are amenable to new kinds of *forensic* viewing (Weizman, 2017) both by experts (who can check extra layers of data embedded in them), but also by ordinary viewers who can, with greater ease than ever before, freeze, slow down, reverse, zoom in and zoom out in ways that, for them, were not previously possible. New forms of visibility are therefore applied to media objects themselves, spreading them to global audiences, and locating the precise *instantiation* of a crisis (the white policeman’s knee on a Black man’s throat) at the focal point of its visibility.

Finally, recent approaches to ‘mediatization’ argue that media have become co-extensive with social life as such (Hepp, 2013): that the social and media cannot be disentangled. In this state of ‘deep mediatization’ (Couldry and Hepp, 2017) media technologies are pervasively embedded in physical and social worlds at small and large scales, from the intimate lives of individuals to global infrastructures and crises (Kaun, 2016), continually mediating social action and interaction. Covid-19 visibly demonstrates the existential stakes of this pervasiveness, particularly during ‘lockdowns’, through the sudden substitution of physical co-presence by mediated virtual presence and action via digital screens: these can be intensively (even if ephemerally) observed in the pandemic-enhanced socialities on Zoom and neighbourhood solidarities on WhatsApp mutual aid groups (Sitrin and Semprar, 2020). Hence part of the pandemic’s cultural significance is as a widely shared and represented experience of mediated relations *in extremis*, of technologized ‘intimacy at a distance’ (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Thompson, 1995) becoming an obligatory condition for much social life and cultural activity (especially in the Global North), and of the potential rupturing and reconfiguration of social spaces and temporal rhythms.

Covid-19 is thus constructed as a *double crisis of mediation*: a crisis of visibility made possible through representations of the pandemic and the application of new media technologies to them, and a crisis of ‘social distance’, of connectivity in confinement, that is performed and emblemized by media technologies themselves. Media are central to the pervasive and extensive visibility of the crisis; the crisis, in turn, has made media themselves more visible.

The articles in this special issue

What if, Nick Couldry asks, the critical deconstruction of how the Covid-19 pandemic has been *interpreted* is not the central task facing cultural studies scholars, but rather how it has been *lived* in deeply unequal conditions within and across societies? Taking issue with the primacy (though not the ultimate necessity) of the question which opens our introductory article – what the pandemic means – Couldry argues that the first task is

to ask what it does, and to address how it re-orders 'living together' around the strategic management of inequality. The global pandemic brutally confronts us with the inadequacy of holistic approaches to culture, society and politics, including even Raymond William's understanding of 'common culture': 'cultures are not wholes, "publics" are inherently divided, democracies are orchestrated conflict'. In this context, Couldry argues, cultural theory has reached an impasse which it is our task to try to think beyond.

Sean Cubitt's commentary explores the kinds of strategic management of inequality that Couldry observes in the pandemic, pointing out capitalist coloniality's ability to turn a crisis into an ordered and profitable disaster. Historically, Cubitt argues, the market, with the support of the state, has repeatedly used disasters as opportunities to advance 'the profitable stability of the colonial order'. This is an order that manages, regulates and exploits people and the environment for profit even under conditions of chaos. Against the use of the 'disaster capitalist frame' which further divides the world and enhances exploitation, Cubitt writes, cultural studies need to move towards 'crisis thinking' and contest the universalist language of information capital and commodity, considering instead the unsettling moment's history-making opportunities.

Corporations attempting to capitalize on crisis is also a core argument in the analysis of 'carewashing' driving **Andreas Chatzidakis** and **Jo Littler's** contribution. The authors focus on the political economy of care, especially through its incorporation in commercial branding strategies during the pandemic – what they refer to as 'carewashing'. The neoliberal instability that intensified with the pandemic, they write, pushed corporations towards reinventing themselves through 'carewashing' their activities – in order both to resist and also profit from the crisis. Offering an empirically grounded analysis of a typology of carewashing that includes opportunistic branding, community chance(-rs), and care as reputational streamroller, the authors understand crisis corporate branding within wider and long-standing practices of corporate capitalism to claim care as profitable property. 'Carewashing', Chatzidakis and Littler argue, is both an economic and a political strategy, reflecting as such a 'passive revolution' in Gramscian terms – a revolution from above that absorbs the language of opposition for profit.

Branding the nation through 'solidarity lite' is at the heart of **Shani Orgad's** and **Radha Sarma Hegde's** cross-national analysis of national health campaigns at the peak of the crisis. With the nation representing a key cultural agency in the production of global crises, the authors argue, health campaigns become regulatory frames of crisis. Most prominently, they show through an empirical analysis across 12 countries that health campaigns projected a revamped and enhanced nationalism alongside an intensified self-responsibilization. As Orgad and Hegde note, 'against the promise of Covid-19 to constitute a "frame-breaking moment" ... national government communications reproduced and cemented concurrently nationalism and neoliberal rationality'. Capitalizing on publics' vulnerabilities, national governments, the authors add, appropriated discourses of collectivity and solidarity to affirm national imagined communities, but at the same time hollowed out the value of the welfare state by presenting national publics as atomized aggregates of responsible individuals.

Nationalism – in particular the banal, ambient, background contexts of national reference and belonging that underpin the visual representation of the pandemic to mainstream news audiences – is a central topic of the article by **Giorgia Aiello, Helen Kennedy,**

C.W. Anderson and **Camilla Mørk Røstvik**. Analysing widely circulated ‘generic news visuals’ of the pandemic, such as images (e.g. health workers wearing face masks) and data visualizations (e.g. graphs and charts) across three different news outlets in the UK, the authors show how these images work through ‘symbolic reiteration, reaffirming unspoken claims and even burgeoning values through a variety of largely unremarkable rhetorical cues – flags, maps, vaccine vials, bar charts, healthcare staff at work, everyday life locales and activities, rising and falling lines.’ Cumulatively these reiterations foreground the state as the key channel for belonging, and promote national (primarily), local and cosmopolitan frameworks as the ordinary, taken-for-granted scenarios and contexts via which the pandemic is shown and known.

If corporations, national governments and the ‘disaster capitalist frame’ appropriate discourses of care and mutuality to perpetuate exploitation and inequalities, how can ‘crisis thinking’ about Covid-19 nevertheless engender transformative possibilities, even if tentatively, for a politics of solidarity? **Myria Georgiou’s** and **Gavan Titley’s** article addresses this question by identifying a key problem: the advent of the pandemic has made possible new scripts of hope, but such scripts are of necessity articulated within an already-deeply fractured and unequal public discursive space. All too often this means such transformative scripts cannot be acted upon, or are only actionable through appropriation by already powerful interests. Georgiou and Titley put this conceptualization of publicness as an unequal domain of struggle into dialogue with the idea of ‘commoning’ – which expresses ongoing processes of solidarity and cooperation against domination and the privatization of resources and spaces. Using three distinctive intersections of publicness and commoning to understand responses to the pandemic in Ireland and the UK, they seek to think anew about how the (politically ambivalent) public visibility of inequities that the pandemic has generated can be oriented towards transformative change.

The language of emergency resilience that incorporates disaster discourse has also been at the heart of hegemonic practices and narratives surrounding the deep crisis affecting the creative cultural industries (CCI) as a result of the pandemic, writes **Audrey Yue**. Yue’s article compares and contrasts institutional and grassroots responses to the disastrous effects of the pandemic for the creative cultural industries. She shows how hegemonic responses use economic modelling and statistics to construct an ideological frame of ‘resilience as deficit’, fundamentally projecting a market response to the crisis. At the same time, grassroots and alternative responses to the crisis – what she refers to as ecological resilience – offer decentred strategies, networked resources and a ‘radical praxis of adaptability’ as a way to collectively respond to the crisis. Analysing an LGBTQI cultural event in Singapore, Yue argues that in the midst of crisis, ‘ecological resilience offers new capacities towards a cultural ecology that can nurture fair work, artistic innovation, economic growth and cultural vitality’.

Also concerned with the pandemic’s impact on media and cultural industries, **Derek Johnson** attends to how existing industrial structures and processes have been put under deep (and again, revealing) pressure, focusing on insurance and the concept of ‘insurability’. Taking Hollywood film and television as a particularly illuminating case, his article traces how the industries have relied on insurance to manage risk: risks to the health of creative workers, usually covered by individual health plans, and risk to companies of losing productivity and revenue through the illness of key workers (e.g. star actors,

directors), usually covered by ‘cast insurance’. During the pandemic in the US these two have intersected in disturbing ways: the ability to continue working can depend upon an employers’ ability or willingness to pay for cast insurance against loss of revenue. Designating a worker ‘uninsurable’ (for instance, because of age or prior medical conditions) threatens their ability to find work, which in turn threatens the maintenance of their individual health plan, which in turn increases the risk of facing Covid uninsured (and the possibility of not surviving). Thus the pandemic has made visible the brutal calculus underpinning these industries’ routine contractual operations, and the moral and existential consequences it can have for workers.

The film industry is the main point of reference for **Turpur Chatterjee’s** article, which focuses on India and on the discursive and practical regulation of ‘contagion’ and bodies at risk in physical cinema theatres. Chatterjee connects the arrival of the pandemic to longer histories of anxiety over commingling bodies in permeable (and affect-laden) spaces of film projection in India, a history encompassing the shift in the late 1990s from a prior exhibition landscape dominated by seemingly chaotic, crowded and purportedly risky (medically and socially) single-screen cinemas, to new multiplex exhibition spaces that promised more regulated forms of experience to privileged customers, achieved through the ‘hygienic’ or ‘sanitized’ sequestration of spaces that reinforced caste and class distinctions. Also tracing the intricacies of this two-decades long shift in relation to new digital systems of domestic film and television delivery, Chatterjee proposes the potential emergence of a new kind of cinematic viewing subject in the wake of the pandemic in India, a spectatorial body amenable to datafication and bio-surveillance.

The dangerous elision between medical and social ‘contagion’ is prominent too in **Macarena Bonhomme’s** and **Amaranta Alfaro’s** article. Interrogating the juncture of disease and race, they describe how perceptions of the contagious migrant, and the non-white body, found spaces of expression and legitimation in Chile’s online media debates on the crisis. The authors analyse how Haitian migrants in Chile have been discursively constituted as dangerous and dirty Others in online news media readers’ comments. They show how the strict lockdowns imposed in the country at the peak of the pandemic turned into a performative regulatory order, mobilized to distinguish the purportedly vulnerable national body from the migrant’s dangerous one. Analysing readers’ comments on the seemingly systematic violations of lockdown rules by Haitian migrants, the authors show that the pandemic revealed more than bodies in crisis, but also values in crisis. Contextualizing the discussion within the histories and trajectories of South-to-South migration, Bonhomme and Alfaro reveal how ‘the crisis’ boosted racial populist narratives that pathologize and dehumanize migrant non-white bodies, and construct them as hypervisible infectious and dirty Others.

Questions of intra-Asian racism in the postcolonial city are at the heart of **Jason Cabañes’** contribution. Specifically, Cabañes shows how the pandemic acutely revealed the entanglement of disinformation, established social narratives and media practices. By focusing on the public discourse of intra-Asian racism in the postcolonial city of Manila, in the Philippines, he analyses how racial narratives that pathologize Chinese people and blame them for the spread of Covid-19 are constituted through the ‘imaginative dimension of digital disinformation’. As he explains, this means that the emergence and appeal

of fake news need to be understood within the media and social ecologies within which they function as narratives. In the case of the Manila audiences Cabañes investigated, fake news promoted prominent frames for the justification and advancement of intra-Asian racism, especially in cases where they resonated with established collective social narratives. Disinformation that blamed Chinese migrants for the spread of Covid-19 was effective as it weaponized predominant social narratives of resentment towards China.

Like Cabañes, **Jack Qui** offers an Asian comparative framework to discuss ‘crisis’ as a contradictory turning point of innovation in working-class network society. Bringing the margins to the centre of the pandemic’s network society, Qui asks whether the crisis is an opportunity to humanize the posthuman. Focusing on the digital labour of food delivery workers across Asia, he shows how the pandemic intensified delivery drivers’ ‘paradoxical state of in-betweenness’. They were caught within an ultra-rationalized and exploitative gig economy and its algorithmic order as it pushed them to breaking point. Yet precisely because of this intensification, they were well placed to promote new forms of solidarity and pressure for policy change. As Qui writes of his comparative case study: ‘we see technology-facilitated accumulation by dispossession, accompanied by diverse and dynamic modes of resistance, collective agency, and cultural solidarity. This is an instance of “southern theory” with its multi-faceted social processes’.

Finally, **Laura Robinson’s** article turns our attention to the institutional levels and ramifications of the pandemic as a crisis. Providing a cross-cultural comparative analysis of multi-lingual and multinational digital forums hosted by three US and Brazilian newspapers, it notes that ‘for Brazilians and Americans, the ravages of the pandemic are not just to the physical body but also to the body politic, indicated by degraded faith in foundational institutions including public-minded journalism, public health, and ultimately these institutions’ relationship with democratic governance’. To comprehend the extent of these ravages, Robinson builds on theories of cultural trauma to introduce the concept of ‘institutional trauma’: this designates a pervasive and profound loss of trust in fundamental social institutions as a result of their radical politicization, that pits social groups (and related political parties and ideologies) against one another. One key consequence of the pandemic in the US and Brazil, for Robinson, is thus severe damage to collective trust in these key social institutions and the role they can and should play in democratic cultures. Moreover, the ramifications of this institutional trauma are uneven and played out over time. Hence the institutional trauma of the pandemic can be manifested as a ‘slow crisis’ whose ultimate temporal parameters are unclear, though they will probably exceed those of the disease itself. By introducing the concept of trauma in relation to the pandemic, and addressing its temporal character, Robinson returns us to key issues identified earlier in this Introduction: how do we understand the pandemic as an event and as a crisis, to what extent is it bounded in time as a distinctive, irruptive phenomenon, and how are its eventfulness and criticality manifested, given the sense that we have long been living – and will continue to live and die – in conditions of perpetual crisis?

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ORCID iDs

Paul Frosh  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4813-074X>

Myria Georgiou  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8771-8469>

Note

1. For a different reading of Braudel's attitude to events, see Tomich (2011).

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Author Biographies

Paul Frosh is a Professor in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His research spans visual culture, photography, media and cultural theory, cultural memory, and media witnessing. His most recent book is *The Poetics of Digital Media* (Polity 2018). He is a Co-Editor of the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Myria Georgiou is Professor in the Department of Media and Communications, LSE. Her research and teaching examine the role of media and communications in politics and cultures of migration and urbanisation. She is the author and editor of five books and her more recent book is *The Digital Border* (co-authored with L. Chouliaraki; NYU Press 2022).