

Intermediated Communication via Social Media Platforms During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

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Despite the ensemble scholarly exchange on health communication, social media, and translation, research has not fully explored all the domains of social media communication, whether individual or participatory, conceived during the pandemic. Considering the nature of digital communication and the production of wide-ranging digital content, as well as its circulation and translation, the essays selected here illuminate how various acts of intermediation spread novel forms of digital interaction and integration among different audiences and online infrastructures. The authors' findings contribute to a growing discourse about how intermediated communications via social media have approached both misinformation and scientific knowledge about the coronavirus, thereby paving new pathways for future research into how individual and collective actions may continue to transform digital environments and everyday lived realities more broadly after COVID-19.

Keywords: (dis)connection, intermediation, integration, participation, transformation, social media

This Special Section appears at a time when COVID-19 may have lost its capacity to stimulate fear, anxiety, tension, and hysteria. Yet, the distortion the pandemic imposed on our lives and our engagement with social media and online spaces more widely, as well as our connections and disconnections with each other, will continue to transform our information consumption, content creation, and platform participation in digital spaces and beyond. The quest for efficient health communication during the rapidly changing circumstances of the pandemic remains one of the greatest challenges experienced in the history of

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medicine. In *Epidemics and Society*, Frank M. Snowden (2020) articulates “a concern about our preparedness as a society to meet new microbial challenges,” primarily with nonexpert audiences in mind (p. ix). Snowden (2020) locates “the impact of epidemics not only on the lives of individual men and women, but also on religion, the arts, the rise of modern medicine and public health, and intellectual history” (p. 2). Despite the advances in biomedical science and sophisticated ICTs, what happened in early 2020 urges us to rethink our capacities to cope with microbes that have little regard for borders and can harm us all.

The spread of the SARS-COV-2 virus is a consequence of anthropocentric interference in the ecological balance, which in turn has forced us to adopt an unprecedented reliance on ICTs (Braidotti, 2020). However, communication apps such as social media sites are not only neutral platforms for socialization and crisis communication but also sites where different narratives play out and increasingly clash with each other. When Dr. Tedros Adhanom Gebreyesus, director of the World Health Organization (WHO), announced in a speech in February 2020 that “we’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic” (para. 1), he was referring to the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and overinformation in the online spaces where scientific knowledge is distorted and (often intentionally) misinterpreted. Notably, public health officials were pressured to translate scanty knowledge of the coronavirus into global clinical practice, usually based on hasty, randomized clinical trials (Susam-Saraeva & Spišiaková, 2021, p. 5). Lipworth, Gentgall, Kerridge, & Steward (2020) and her associates remind us of the risks inherent in a too-rapid knowledge transition from laboratory tests to the development of vaccines and therapies. While efficient research governance is essential to overcoming the ethical challenges involved and reinstating public trust in science and public health authorities, other actors have a role to play, too. In what areas can different sectors collaborate to maintain “COVID-safe” intermediation beyond health communication?

As the pandemic progressed, many communication strategies were developed in isolation from each other. Utilizing platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Skype, local and global businesses found they could continue to function while developing new working models and marketing strategies to adapt to the isolation and travel bans enforced by nation-states across the globe. Content creators such as webnovelists and digital comic artists found unique opportunities during isolation to devise fictional narratives as a strategy to remediate real-world events (Stavans, 2020). Platforms such as Zoom, Google, Instagram, and TikTok enable educators and students, as well as medical consultants, to devise both appropriate models of online teaching and the coproduction of crucial scientific and health knowledge designed to tackle misinformation (El-Jardali, Bou-Karroum, & Fadlallah, 2020). At the same time, various marginalized communities are forming “affective publics” on Twitter, for instance, to support each other and make their voices heard in response to the risks and injustices experienced during the pandemic. These and other forms of digital intermediation are constantly being shaped by—and simultaneously reshaping—mediated online interactions between networked individuals via social media platforms.

Intermediation on social media platforms consists of a heterogeneous set of activities that often underestimate or neglect traditional notions of communication and entertainment (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; van Dijck, 2021). Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s (1968) seminal essays on translation and storytelling, Yang (2020) aligned communication with translation in terms of “the will and capacity to be attentive to the other” (p. 190). Such translation extends and transforms an original source document, which thereby experiences an afterlife in different target contexts. These trajectories connect with

Benjamin's understanding of storytelling, which concerns the exchange of ideas and experiences between storytellers and "self-forgetful" listeners who are prepared to listen attentively and retell the original stories in their own ways (Benjamin, 1968, p. 91). Yang (2020) contends that communication "is premised on the recognition of difference, dialogue, receptivity, mutual change, and self-transformation" (p. 190) and hence can be best understood as translation.

Van Dijck and Alinejad (2020) have shown how policymakers, scientists, and nonexpert actors in The Netherlands have been negotiating practicable, reliable knowledge translation in the contested public discourse domain. They have identified two models that cofunctioned with and transformed each other during the early phase of the pandemic. When the aged institutional model used for the linear, top-down mass communication favored by legacy media lost its efficacy, the nascent networked model was adopted by state authorities and media institutions to engage public audiences on new media platforms, traversing multiple platform domains and social sectors to respond to different perspectives, needs, and possibilities. While the networked model opened alternative spaces for communicating, negotiating, and (re)installing truthful information, it was vulnerable to the incursions of disinformation; digital influencers and opinion leaders weaponized social media to challenge the authentic knowledge discourse, thus jeopardizing the hard-won trust in the mainstream media. Responding to these risks, the institutional model was reintroduced into the chaotic information flow to restore the system of checks and balances and to assist those actors who were working independently to detect, respond to, and contain disinformation.

Recent studies also highlight the crucial involvement of language services (including translation) in crisis situations where translators and interpreters can help provide timely communication to enhance preparedness (O'Brien & Federici, 2020). Rather than merely overcoming language barriers, translation bridges the affected individuals and communities and those who seek to communicate with them, explaining how particular crises will impact on different groups and how crisis management and recovery can best be implemented. Translation has also become an integrated solution for health communication, mediating information flows among different parties, including volunteers, members of affected communities, responders, on-site crisis managers, media personnel, and policymakers. Effective translation can also prevent miscommunication between doctors and their patients in life-threatening situations. And because emergent communication strategies cannot always rely on English as a lingua franca, translation also plays a vital role in building trust within and beyond the areas affected by a crisis like the pandemic.

Of course, such communication strategies, whether utilizing translation or not, will be successful only if the target audiences end up adopting the desired behavioral changes and engaging in broader social cooperation (Pym & Hu, 2022). Users can compare different sources addressing the same subject to create and spread their own reliable information. Voices urging solidarity and trust can be drowned out by bad actors who seek to fragment public opinion on issues such as vaccination, governmental accountability, and the production and dissemination of information. Lacking proficiency in English, those marginalized by the mainstream resort to such minority platforms, specifically those using their first languages, to access information communicated at the local level. Even so, information translated from authoritative media sources can still lead users to challenge the mainstream media despite the credibility of the material. Producing reliable information for multilingual communities should not only fulfill the criterion of accuracy but also comprehension of the translated materials, which should cater to diverse literacies, reading skills,

and other existing and emerging cultural and cognitive factors. The constantly evolving challenges produced by initial distrust from audiences reflect their increased media literacy and their reliance on alternative sources outside the mainstream (Flew, 2019).

Developing this Special Section has enabled us to further engage with the emerging synergies of communication-as-translation. Collectively, the selected essays lead us back to the understudied impacts of the outbreak to reveal and engage with the people involved and their activities on social media. Surprisingly, this modest collection of essays covers most of the themes we originally sought to address. While several of the authors identify with Australia in terms of academic affiliation or citizenship, we participated in this collaboration from dispersed locations around the globe to explore social media and the people using them during the COVID-19 crisis. The article by Lee and Lee investigates how South Korea's gay community became the object of public attention within the first four months of the pandemic in 2020 after a news agency reported that a COVID-19 patient had visited some gay nightclubs in Itaewon, Seoul. Stimulating an unexpected level of publicity, a plethora of news content was published across online media platforms. This case study documents and analyzes how news of the "Itaewon outbreak" spread from online news to YouTube to investigate the modalities of homophobic discourse and its circulation across different media outlets. By examining the interplay between the Korean online news media and YouTube news channels in spreading the Itaewon story, Lee and Lee discuss how the nationwide opprobrium directed at the gay community was instigated within an "attention ecology." They argue that news media and YouTube news channels collaborated as affective mechanisms that defined dominant feelings about nonnormative subjects (including gay bodies) as a way of engaging with the pandemic crisis.

Next, Lu and Lu show how an increasing number of individuals turned to social media for information during the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrating a widespread lack of knowledge about how trust is built and expressed using the example of Bilibili, one of China's largest networked social media environments. To bridge the trust gap, their study explores the construction of "distributed trust" on Bilibili by drawing on van Dijck and Alinejad's (2020) networked model of knowledge communication and Metzger and Flanagin's (2008) analytical framework of trust in the digital age. Focusing on COVID-19-related videos circulated by diaspora micro-influencers, this study explores how platform-specific features of Bilibili enhance the construction of distributed trust and how the dynamics operating between uploaders' videos and users' comments contribute to this process. The results show that user participation and participatory surveillance enabled by platform-specific features play key roles in the transformation and evolution of distributed trust.

Turning to information consumption, the article by Holland and colleagues examines citizens' experiences and strategies for navigating misinformation on social media and online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several online and face-to-face focus groups conducted via a peer conversation method in Australia in early 2021 reveal that participants encountered a range of misinformation in news media and online platforms. Their responses varied in unexpected ways, including intervention by challenging and correcting misinformation, ignoring it, or blocking it. Verification practices were also common, but surprisingly, the reporting of content was rare. Their findings illustrate how participants expressed confidence in their own resilience in the face of misinformation while suggesting attributes that make others more susceptible to the negative consequences that result from accepting it.

The articles discussed above investigate the theme of narrative conflict and its intersections with a complex assemblage of professional and user-generated public discourses. They emphasize aspects of technological intervention sought by mainstream media, state actors, and micro-digital influencers in critical domains of social justice, diversity, and inclusion. The work led by Nicola Evans builds on these studies by investigating how web series—short-form episodic content distributed via online platforms—are tailor-made for capturing everyday life in a pandemic. Creators of web series often work on tight budgets, recruit crew from personal networks, and utilize their own homes as convenient shooting locations—features replicated under lockdown conditions. The study by Evans, Ryan, Ellingsen, Burkholder, and Da Silva examines three Web series released in 2020 that chronicled everyday life during the pandemic: *Cancelled* (Eve, 2020), a Spanish-Australian drama; *If I Were There With You* (Vaz, 2020), an experimental Brazilian Web series; and the German comedy *Drinnen—Im Internet sind alle gleich* (Inside: Everyone is equal on the Internet; Käßbohrer & Heineking, 2020). The authors unpack some of the previously unrecognized ways in which storytellers are utilizing this new medium to narrativize the politics of everyday life and show how Web series more broadly can interrogate and expand our understanding of the role of digital culture in everyday life for a post-COVID-19 future.

Finally, the study by Yecies, Wang, Amirghasemi, Lu, and Kariippanon investigates some of the ways in which readers of digital comics on one of the largest webtoon platforms of its kind utilized its commenting feature during the COVID-19 pandemic. A big data emotion detection technique is used to identify, categorize, and analyze the parasocial contents of over 14 million user-generated comments posted on tens of thousands of series on Webtoon's self-publishing section, known as CANVAS. Between early 2020 and the end of 2021, an expanding cohort of readers exploited the site as a quasicommunal space for communicating a range of sentiments and sharing commiserations. This extratextual expression of attitudes, fears, and emotions experienced during one of the most chaotic crises of our time differentiates these users from others who post general opinions about the webtoons themselves. While sharing personal struggles and reaching out for help on social media entertainment platforms may be unsurprising, the apparent lack of formal support mechanisms on such sites remains a major concern for commentators, scholars, and industry stakeholders alike.

Beyond the topics and case studies explored in this Special Section lie several key areas for further research, including narrative conflicts on social media, COVID-safe ethics, (dis)trust in intermediated communication, knowledge transfer and the "infodemic," and forms of individual and collective resistance during crises. These are interrelated themes that are closely related to transmediated communication via social media during crises. In contemporary popular culture, social media have become the main sites where different narratives reinforce conventional stories, but also clash with each other. As a result, users are divided in their understanding of an array of issues including the origins of the pandemic, which nations are successfully "flattening the curve," and hence which governments are the most trustworthy. While state actors and citizen mediators are deploying social media to disseminate and scrutinize information and controversies surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, other social media users are accumulating media power by translating and circulating journalistic texts for the consumption of specific diaspora communities in multilingual societies. In such situations, these users-turned-translators become new micro-influencers in community-specific social media communications, catering to audiences who mostly lack the linguistic proficiency to access their local mainstream media. This theme explores the complex assemblage of professional and user-generated narratives around the pandemic, with an emphasis on the technological intervention sought by state actors

and micro-digital influencers alike. Participating in this domain requires nuanced approaches to forming trust while displacing distrust—or at least managing it at the interpersonal and institutional levels.

Translation activities on social media platforms consist of a heterogeneous set of mediating activities, which include but go beyond linguistic transfer. Those who initiate such mediating activities are cultural intermediaries in the fast-evolving era of media convergence. Their strategic and creative digital intermediations in response to the new realities of the pandemic are constantly being shaped by—and simultaneously reshaping—mediated online interactions between networked individuals via social media platforms. Notably, business agents and organizations are seeking to adapt to isolation and travel bans by exploiting the limitless potential of blockchain for the invention and localization of new strategies and workflows. The media and creative industries are discovering new ways of working on public and specialized platforms following the pandemic outbreak. On their affiliated platforms, individual artists, storytellers, and user-content-creators are constantly seeking to intermediate pre- and post-pandemic realities in their creative works (Feng, 2020). These and other innovations introduced by cultural intermediaries have significant implications for “COVID-safe” social media communication and intermediation in the post-pandemic era.

In a related arena, diverse, creative methods of knowledge transfer are being practiced by medical professionals and citizen science groups who utilize platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to communicate crucial scientific and health knowledge. The information is generated and spread not only in linguistic texts but also in multimedia formats such as memes, videos, comic strips, and digital games. However, it is extremely difficult for social media platforms to monitor the “knowledge” circulated. For their part, despite their commitment to tackling misinformation, the new digital influencers cannot eliminate the spread of misinformation across platforms and among users from different social and cultural groups (Buchanan, 2020). The effective management of this phenomenon is likely to depend on the triangulation between users, influencers, and social media platforms to enable platform-specific, age-appropriate, and gender-friendly communication of knowledge to prevent the rapid spread of misinformation from amplifying tensions in already strained situations (Eysenbach, 2020). This approach invites scholars, practitioners, and stakeholders to explore an array of linguistic, cultural, and ethical challenges faced by mediated communications in times of crisis. It signals a need for new knowledge and media literacies to be acquired by communication intermediaries in their efforts to facilitate multilingual communication in community service, business, and media settings, as well as improvements that can be realized through the further incorporation of “smart” translation tools and technologies.

Given that the virus hit many societies already affected by natural disasters and social turmoil, it remains a tremendous challenge for geographically dispersed communities in affected areas to recover from previous catastrophes, with political resistance continuing to be active in various creative occupations and organizations in the digital arena (Yang, 2020; Zhao, 2020). In these sites of precarious digital labor, nonpolitical communications such as gossiping and (micro)celebrity culture can be mobilized for political purposes, whereas cyber-populism can instigate political action. The convergence between recreational life and cultural politics that Henry Jenkins (2004) predicted about 20 years ago has become our reality. Over time, this theme, which includes cyberpsychology, promises to emphasize the criticality of social media in organizing movements and circulating activist discourses in times of lockdown and social distancing (Bao, 2020; Wiederhold, 2020). Future research is likely to stress the crucial role of social media in galvanizing

dissidents in high-risk situations, thereby enabling the spread of crucial information in various modalities among large and geographically dispersed populations. We have yet to fully understand how platform-enabled societies can aid the spread of voices representing precarious individuals and groups that might not otherwise have garnered attention elsewhere.

In sum, this Special Section—a companion to other *International Journal of Communication* Special Sections including *COVID-19, Digital Media, and Health: Lessons Learned and the Way Ahead for the Study of Human Communication*—showcases how communication intermediaries on social media are utilizing a wide range of modalities to represent and rewrite the “new normal” during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media facilitate crucial platforms for us to talk back to the small virus that has shown an enormous capacity to endow both language and larger cultural discourse with strange new meanings. In this unique context, we aim to demonstrate the novelty of intermediation between services, ideas, and behaviors, as well as their transformative impact on the interactive agency of digital platforms and cultural intermediaries.

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