Introduction
Mediating crisis: COVID-19 and beyond
by Laura Robinson, Jeremy Schulz, Massimo Ragnerda, Noah McClain, Maria Laura Ruiu, Molly M. King, and Aneka Khilnani

Abstract
This paper provides a summary of content in this special issue.

Prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, this issue of First Monday brings together international scholars to examine how crises are mediated in a variety of geographic, media, and institutional settings. The issue examines foci including the digital skills needed in a time of crisis, organizational response and adaptation to crisis, mediated crisis response, and innovative methods with which to study crises from the pandemic and beyond.

In the first section, three articles examine digital skills needed in times of crisis. The first article, “Mobilizing social support: New and transferable digital skills in the era of COVID-19” is by Molly-Gloria Harper, Anabel Quan-Haase, and William Hollingshead. By analyzing 101 semi-structured interviews conducted in Toronto, Canada in 2013–2014, the study reveals how residents of the East York community use digital technology to mobilize social support. The authors find that East Yorkers readily deploy their digital life skills in different spheres of their lives, including substituting for in-person social and companionship contact, services, and technical support: “different digital media provide different types of social support, creating benefits for individuals who have media multiplexity with their social ties.” The research includes connections to the current challenges of isolation during COVID-19 and recommendations for increasing social support among different age groups.

The next article is “Tensions between digital inequalities and digital learning opportunities in Russian universities during the pandemic” by Anna Gladkova, Massimo Ragnerda, and Elena Vartanova. This article focuses on how the educational system has been seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the article looks at various educational platforms and tools used by Russian universities since lockdown in spring 2020 and how this shift towards the digital arena is shaping, influencing, and altering the role of educators. As the authors skillfully conclude, “Doing online teaching effectively is not just a matter of technology and platforms but requires redesigning the training approach and knowing how to best use different pedagogies and digital teaching tools.” This article highlights how distance learning has allowed lessons and programs to be held and completed, but at the same time brought a critical light to bear
on inequalities mainly due to the digital divide and the lack of technological equipment in some areas of the country.

From Russia we turn to Spain in “Self-confidence and digital proficiency: Determinants of digital skills perceptions among young people in Spain” by Daniel Calderon, Anna Sanmartín Ort, and Stribor Kuric Kardelis. Using a structured questionnaire of 1,200 young people, the authors investigate self-perceived levels of digital skills. While gender appeared as a factor only within the highest competence group, socioeconomic conditions have a significant influence on self-perceived digital skill level. They find that higher self-perceived competence is related to use of a wider variety of digital tool as the authors tactfully conclude, “The outcomes show the importance of socio-demographic factors and of the processes of appropriation of technology when young people perceive their level of digital performance, which are only partially related to socioeconomic situation, since digital vulnerability is mediated by acquired cultural patterns of use of technology.” Additionally, the types of barriers users cite also relate to self-perceived competence, implying other non-demographic types of inequality in access and use of digital devices and media.

Continuing our discussion of digital skills across the lifecourse, our final article in this section bridges our discussion of digital skills and organizational response with a particularly vulnerable population: older adults. In “Grey Digital Outcasts and COVID-19,” Simon Rogerson takes a heuristic approach to offer a global panorama of how older adults are more likely to be digitally disadvantaged and thereby especially isolated by lockdowns and social distancing in response to COVID-19. Drawing on insights from the pandemic, Rogerson takes a unique approach to argue multiple paths to technological inclusion that would facilitate digital adoption in future crises. Offering valuable insights for policy makers, Rogerson summarizes his recommendations: as 1) “the digital technology must arrive ready to go. There should be not set up procedures,” 2) “WiFi must be automatically connected or the digital technology has a built-in cellular connection,” 3) “The interface needs to be very simple and not confusing,” 4) “The use of the digital technology should not be dependent on the kindness of another person to operate it,” 5) “if the digital technology stops working there needs to be a way to troubleshoot and fix the problem,” and 6) “the old-fashioned telephone is the acceptability benchmark for the digital technology.”

Moving from digital skills, next, we turn to the important role played by diverse media in how organizations encounter crises through three articles tackling public transit, academic conferences, and universities, respectively. We begin with “Meming the Catch-22: Doing security where the steel wheel hits the rail” by Noah McClain. Set in the New York City subway system in the late 2000s, the author uses an Internet meme which parodied a familiar security poster as an analytic and ethnographic route into understanding the status of mandates in times of crisis. Subway workers, McClain shows, found a particular sort of dark humor in the meme. If we can get the joke the ways subway workers do, the author argues, we begin to understand their world and the problematic status of “security” in that subway environment, from a time when it was at the forefront of national anxiety over terror threats. Memes, McClain argues, may draw from broad fabrics of popular culture, but can take on unique local meanings in certain communities of practice. Interrogating the meanings found in meme humor and ridicule, and the worldviews that underpin those meanings can offer shortcuts to understanding key worlds, and the status of crisis mandates deployed within those key worlds with implications for future disasters and crises including new waves of the pandemic.

Next is “Going virtual: Academic conferences in the age of COVID-19” by Leandro Rodriguez Medina and Wesley Shrum. This article shows how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted multiple aspects of the everyday work of many professional and academic associations. Specifically, the authors examine the processes through which conferences quickly pivoted from face-to-face to online venues and considers the implications of these shifts in terms of environmental consequences, technological affordances, time management, inclusivity, socialization, and networking. The authors identify lessons that can be learned and suggest a hybrid model as a potential solution that might fit the preferences and needs of different participants. However, such a model needs to be further explored as the authors explain: “Such hybridization will require the mingling of digital life skills and our face-to-face, technologically unmediated
socialization skills in professional environments, such as academic conferences.”

Moving from academic conferences to another organization devoted to the dissemination of knowledge, our next focus is on Brazilian university response to the pandemic in “From Xerox to Zoom: Brazilian universities during the coronavirus pandemic” by Heloisa Pait. The research adopts a historical perspective to explore how prestigious Brazilian universities were slow in their appropriation of digital media and online learning, at first halting all courses only to go online many months later after lengthy debate between stakeholders. As the Pait explains: “Analyzing the very rich public and official statements produced by a set of prestigious Brazilian universities, the research shows the ways in which the quarantine both challenged and mobilized the deepest values of the country’s higher education institutions.” Findings reveal the unique contours of the Brazilian case in which “a rigid communication culture, in which the values and the history of the knowledge, media and institutional culture intersect in a moment of crisis.”

The theme of mediated response to crises continues in the next two articles on social media exploring Brazilian BookTubers’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic and Twitter reactions following the death of George Floyd. In “Brazilian Booktubers and the COVID-19 pandemic,” Inês Silvia Vitorino Sampaio and Andressa Souza Costa study young influencers who encourage reading among their audiences by reviewing literature on YouTube during COVID-19. Using a mixed methods approach, the authors analyze survey data and videos of top books of 2020 produced by BookTubers to uncover the skills these young prosumers are developing and the pressures they face in light of lockdowns. By both “reading the world and reading the word,” BookTubers empathetically acknowledge the hardships of the pandemic in tandem with other longstanding societal inequalities. Findings shed light on digital competencies around information management and communication, ethical and cultural awareness, flexibility, and creativity employed by Brazilian BookTubers to balance professional pressures of marketing and productivity with inspiring young readers.

From YouTube we turn to Twitter in “Intersecting matters: #GeorgeFloyd and #Covid19” by Jenny L. Davis and Tony P. Love. Davis and Love study “hashtag convergence” to analyze Twitter messages in which hashtags co-occur. The authors contend that: “There is no intrinsic or obvious tie between a prolonged global pandemic that kills millions and a single police encounter that kills one” yet in the eyes of those tweeting “the connection between COVID-19 and George Floyd is inextricable.” Analysis of the data reveals a set of “symbolic hooks” that participants employ to link the politics of pandemic with politics of the Black Lives Matter movement. Foci include navigating participants’ calls for the urgency for protest weighed against the perceived dangers of human congregation, as well as the weight of pandemic deaths versus those at the hands of law enforcement. Their analysis shows how people forge connections between the personal and the public, between race and corporeal vulnerability, and between the concerns of protest movements and the institutional response to a public health crisis.

Finally, two studies speaking to how innovative visual methods can be harnessed to deepen studies of crises in the future. We begin this discussion with “Distance learning, digital inequality, and COVID-19: Visualizing learning channels among California public school students” by Jeremy Schulz and Laura Robinson. The authors make use of innovative visualizations from the field of bioinformatics to unpack digital learning channels among low-SES students in terms of the interrelationships among four primary learning channels that they identify as: the self-directed learning channel, peer-oriented channel, family-oriented channel, and channel corresponding to the students’ teachers. Painting a broad picture of the plight of digitally disadvantaged students’ access to learning opportunities on the eve of the pandemic they illuminate the dire circumstances made catastrophically worse by the sudden shift to remote learning occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. Visualizing the results with Venn diagrams, Schulz and Robinson substantiate how “school-related research skills are best developed through educator-led instruction, while multi-media and social media skills can be developed through the combination of instruction on the part of peers and family members as long as the learning is simultaneously self-directed.” Their findings offer insights for policy-makers for distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and future crises events.

The issue closes with “Using data visualizations to study digital public spaces” by Yee Man Margaret Ng
who adopts a historical perspective to explore the evolution of data visualizations in studying digital public spaces. Calling to mind the many visualizations of the pandemic including the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Dashboard, this research brings to the fore the benefits of adopting visualization techniques across time and space. To use the author's words: “We have become very disciplined in a very short time, partly through data visualization. Besides its educational role, data visualizations became indispensable tools for governments to take the right decisions at the right time. They helped to flatten the curve and saved lives while limiting economic damage.” As Ng indicates, the global crisis provided favorable conditions to rethink the value of data visualization, its power and practical and ethical consequences to be considered.

In closing, together the articles respond to scientific, policy and public concern around the uncertainty deriving from the combination of both a global pandemic and its related technological acceleration. By probing different cultural, institutional, and societal arenas, the articles reveal how the pandemic represents a reflexive moment on how different aspects of everyday life have been affected by the technological acceleration imposed by social distancing. Findings across the articles reflect on the economic, environmental, educational, political and ethical consequences of shifting online in light of COVID-19. Finally, the international breadth of case studies provides some lessons to be learned in different contexts by suggesting important considerations for future policy-making to accommodate adaptation and reinforce technological resilience.

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