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INTRODUCTION TO THE COVID DOSSIER

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Abstract: Overview of the articles in the COVID Dossier in *Wide Screen* Vol.9 No.1

The creation, circulation and consumption of media became a focus of social and cultural discourse around the fundamental changes the entire world experienced as a result of the quarantine imposed by COVID-19. One reason is that it was media and the arts that helped fill in the emptiness of staying at home during quarantine—be it film, TV or music on streaming services, TikToks, videogames or offline media like jigsaw puzzles that saw a surprising increase in sales. Second, as the world adapted to “work from home,” it quickly became apparent that a fundamental shift was coming into place wherein the boundaries between home and work blurred more than it ever had before. Zoom surprised everyone by overshadowing Skype as the go-to for virtual meetings, classes, conferences etc. Zoom also pervaded the social sphere wherein people “met” with friends and families online as the best alternative to staying in touch while also staying in quarantine. Zoom’s ability to span across the social and the professional is central not just to the shifting boundaries between work/school and home, or work and play, but by extension, in redefining these spaces and the protocols attached to them. This dossier presents a look at some transformations that occurred in the media landscape.

Scholarship on the transformations in the global mediasphere due to COVID was available as early as the Fall of 2020, less than six months into the quarantine. Unsurprisingly, most disciplines produced work that was related to media—creation and consumption in particular. From various arms of medicine studying the effects of excessive media usage during

the pandemic¹, to education related work on online learning²; from sociological studies of social media³ and misinformation in a time of social quarantine⁴, to the economics of working from home. Film and media studies was confronted with opposing senses of loss and explosion—the loss of film theaters, large screens, and viewing publics, and an explosion of demand for more audio-visual content, more bandwidth, more networks, and more mediation in every sphere of life. A significant amount of scholarship focused on the reception and consumption of media content. The politics of spectatorship received a great deal of attention with concerns ranging from the dominance of small screens (Wofford 2021), the fate of film festivals (Cable 2021), the anxieties of pandemic viewing both collectively (Chatterjee 2022), and virtually (Rich 2021). Questions of binge watching resurfaced with new rigor, accompanied by interventions in viewing behavior and binge watching by short-form video apps like TikTok (Kendall 2021). The socio-cultural perceptions of binge watching underwent a massive transformation from one associated with excess (Alexander 2021) to one that was presented as the only solace during the isolation of quarantine (Horeck 2021).

This dossier hopes to build upon existing work to negotiate the changes in scope of some fundamental aspects of the discourse media during lockdown, and perhaps also rethink definitions of terms such as “media”, “spectatorship”, “content”, and “performance.” Nathan Scoll’s article in this dossier examines the changes in viewing spaces as arthouse and underground film theaters shifted modalities from their brick-and-mortar theaters to what Scoll calls “digital cinematheques.” Nearly all work on cinema and the lockdown has reflected upon

¹ Footnotes 1-4 are examples of articles I came across even with the search terms “media” “Covid”. The selection is not indicative of anything other than the pervasive presence of media as a factor in studies across disciplines with respect to COVID. Chen, Yidi, et al. “The Mediating Effect of Media Usage on the Relationship between Anxiety/Fear and Physician-Patient Trust during the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Psychology & Health*, vol. 37, no. 7, July 2022, pp. 847–66. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08870446.2021.1900573>.

² SALIH, Karimeldin M. A., et al. “Social Media Utilization and Its Impact on Male Medical Students’ Learning during Covid-19 Pandemic.” *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education (TOJDE)*, vol. 23, no. 2, Apr. 2022, pp. 140–52. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.17718/tojde.1096411>.

³ Ali, Rabia, and Asma Khalid. “COVID-19 and Domestic Violence in Pakistan: An Analysis of the Media Perspective.” *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, vol. 22, no. 12, Dec. 2021, p. COV6. EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsinc&AN=edsinc.A685710768&site=eds-live>

⁴ Saud, Muhammad, et al. “Usage of Social Media during the Pandemic: Seeking Support and Awareness about COVID-19 through Social Media Platforms.” *Journal of Public Affairs (14723891)*, vol. 20, no. 4, Nov. 2020, pp. 1–9. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2417>.

the tremendous loss that movie theaters suffered during the pandemic when there was a moratorium on public gatherings in closed spaces. Relegated to the home, and by extension, to smaller screens to watch films on, cinephiles across the world mourned the loss of watching films together, physically together. Unsurprisingly, workarounds and apps that would allow communal viewing sprung up all over the internet with browser extensions like NetflixParty and Zoom viewing sessions enabling watching films with people, and perhaps realizing that it was indeed possible to share a viewing experience with those who are separated from us by distance. Scoll examines a shift in the scope of communal screenings in the time of quarantine and social distancing. Focusing on three underground digital cinematheques in Los Angeles, Scoll deconstructs what a movie theater is looking at once at the future of film exhibition venues and also at the past. Scoll lays bare what pandemic digital communities exposed about the culture spaces like arthouse movie theaters. Digital cinematheques, as Scoll argues, “have fused the pandemic phenomenon of virtual screening parties via internet platforms like Zoom, MS Teams, Kast, and TwitchTV with the curated and communally oriented programming of post- “Gen X” arthouse venues like Austin-based Alamo Drafthouse and Los Angeles’ now-defunct Cinefamily” (Scoll 2022: 1). While the overwhelming feeling with regard to the shift to a virtual modality was one of loss, Scoll notes that the inability to co-occupy the physical space of the movie theater became a corrective to some of the threats that communal viewing has posed for decades, particularly for women and minority audiences.

Like Scoll, Travis Wagner’s article is concerned with the transformations that took place with the change in the modality of social and professional exchange with virtual forms of interaction replacing physical ones. Wagner explores the transformations in the sphere of pedagogy with a spotlight on #zoomfails, a trend of TikTok videos wherein students and teachers shared instances, usually recorded, of failing to switch appropriately to either the technology or protocols of teaching online. Wagner approaches this shift in spatial terms, suggesting that “what had once been a spatialized exchange between instructors and students turned into a virtual encounter” (Wagner 2022: 1). As in Scoll’s work, there are relational changes in this sphere as well, particularly as students and teachers effectively allowed each other into their personal spaces while attempting to replicate their professional relationships and hierarchies. While pedagogical practices are based on performance by default, the recordings added another layer of spectatorship whereby the performance—consciously or unconsciously—had an audience

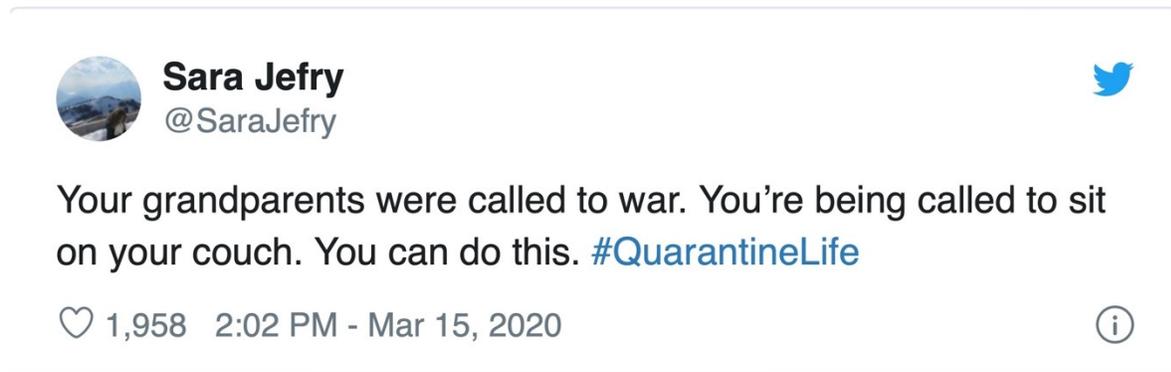
beyond the students being taught in the moment. It bears repeating that it was not just students “exposing” their teachers that made the TikTok trend, but also teachers revealing their own technological faux pas. Each failure became a lesson in itself for other students and teachers that constituted the extended audience. Wagner underscores the generative potential of these failures, by highlighting not just the pedagogical value that these failures hold, but arguing also for a need to embrace “failure as a site of learning.”

The shift from physical to virtual space also meant a shift from professional to personal spaces in a way that personal meant enclosed, isolated, but also safe from the threat of the virus as long as there was no breach. Michael Stock’s article considers the resurgence of the car as a safe space that re-emerged with the pandemic, perhaps for the first time since the mass production and affordable availability of enclosed vehicles in the 1920s. While the home allowed (and was needed for) virtual exchange, the car was the conduit for face-to-face interaction with the outside world that wasn’t mediated through screens. Being the only means of mobility acceptable, the car was, more than ever, the lifeline for commerce with delivery apps and services, the demand for which was at an all-time high. Delivery allowed bringing the outside world in through consumer goods, meals and groceries etc. As such, Stock argues, the automobile complicated notions of “being inside” and “going out” as it mediated the two, allowing people to be both outside, and inside in a place they were sheltered from the virus. In so doing, Stock presents a view of mobility as both mediation and as “place” during the pandemic.

The aim of this dossier was to explore the sites and shifts that the pandemic not just affected, but arguably reshaped. On display, are the ruptures and the continuities within the media landscapes of the world. While “change” is the underlying thread, each of these articles points to a future that won’t simply “go back” to things the way they were. Instead, the pandemic proved to be a reckoning that put ontological conversations in place that could rebuild aspects and elements of the mediasphere from scratch.

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Fig. 1 The call to stay at home became synonymous with watching TV. Source: Twitter



Fig. 2 Techno-social faux pas. Source: Twitter



Fig. 3 Professional space and private space overlap. Source: Twitter

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