THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY IN THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT:
Throughout the history of the field of media and mass communication theory and research, claims have been made that 'mass' media and 'mass' communication are concepts that do not fit the contemporary media environment (anymore). However, contemporary developments and debates regarding the role of media and communication in the context of a global pandemic clearly suggest otherwise. In this article, the field of study regarding media and mass communication is reviewed based on the (7) fundamental theories explaining the role of media in society, as these have emerged out of a century of scholarship in media studies and communication science. The study aims to show how each of these theories can be considered to be 'at work' in current debates and concerns about the role of media and communication in the global coronavirus pandemic/infodemic.

KEY WORDS:
communication science, coronavirus, mass communication, McQuail, media theory, media studies

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Introduction

In 2020, a new, 7th edition of one of the seminal handbooks of the field of media studies and communication research, *McQuail's Media and Mass Communication Theory*, was published.[1] It is one of the foundational texts that has in its various iterations contributed to establishing the fields of media studies and communication science, dating all the way back to 1969. Throughout the history of the field, claims have been made that 'mass' media and 'mass' communication are concepts that do not fit the contemporary media environment (anymore). However, contemporary developments and debates regarding the role of media and communication in the context of a global pandemic clearly suggest otherwise.

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1   See: MCQUAIL, D., DEUZE, M.: *McQuail's Media and Mass Communication Theory*. 7th Edition. London : Sage, 2020.

In this scholarly article, I will briefly introduce and define the field of study regarding media and communication research, and explain how different disciplines engage in this field. In McQuail's new handbook we outline seven fundamental theories explaining the role of media in society, as these have emerged out of a century of scholarship. I will show how each of these theories can be considered to be 'at work' in current debates and concerns about the role of media and communication in the global coronavirus crisis.

In conclusion, I pay specific attention to what is perhaps the most significant development of the current moment: the dual convergence of, on the one hand, a hybrid media system where traditional mass media institutions (such as mainstream journalism, advertising, film and television) exist and operate side-by-side to a new media environment mainly consisting of so-called 'mass self-communication' in social media. On the other hand, all of this convergence takes place alongside another convergence, as articulated by Fuchs: that of the social spaces and locales of work, leisure, education, the public and private sphere, friendships, and the family in the 'supra-locale' of the home where (under conditions of social distancing, quarantine and self-isolation) all life is organised and structured from a distance, in media.[2]

Mass Communication and Media Theory

The study of media and mass communication – from its beginnings in the early 20th century as a subset of then emerging disciplines such as (mass) psychology and sociology to its establishment as a field of its own in the 1980s – follows a few fundamental assumptions, as outlined by Lang:
- First, media and mass communication are pervasive and ubiquitous.
- Second, media and mass communication act upon (and are acted upon by) people and their social environments.
- Third, media and mass communication change both the environment and the person.
- Fourth, the primary goals and questions of media and mass communication researchers are to demonstrate the various elements (production – content – reception), roles, influences and effects of media and mass communication, and, if possible, explain how they come about.[3]

The foundational assumptions of the disciplined study of media and mass communication are grounded in a set of basic definitions. "Mass communication", first and foremost, refers to messages transmitted to a large audience via one or more media. Media are the (technological and formally organised) means of transmission of such messages. "Media theory" considers how these messages mean different things to different people as determined by the different channels used to communicate them. Given the proliferation of media in people's everyday lives, it becomes crucial not only to understand and explain how the process of mediated (mass) communication works, but also to appreciate the role specific media play in bringing about certain meanings and impact.

A useful way of locating the topic of media and mass communication in a wider field of communication enquiry is according to the different levels of social organisation at which communication takes place. According to this criterion, mass communication can then be seen as one of several society-wide communication processes, at the apex of a pyramidal distribution of other communication networks – primarily that of interpersonal communication and mass self-communication. A "communication network" refers to any set of interconnected points (persons, places and paraphernalia) that enable the transmission and exchange of information between them. Seen from this perspective, "mass communication" is a network that connects many receivers to one source, "interpersonal communication" is a network that connects two or more points on a more or less equal basis (where anyone can be both a source and receiver), and "mass self-communication" is a network that connects many sources and receivers – both in real time (such as in an online chat or video call) and asynchronous (for example, when people visit, like and comment someone else's contribution to an online platform). What must be clear, in the contemporary technological context, is that the distinctions between these communication networks are porous, as many media phenomena – especially those occurring online – can exhibit properties of all these communication networks simultaneously.

In short, whereas the study of media and communication had its origins primarily in concerns regarding the social organisation and consequences of mass communication (and, correspondingly, focused on the messages and practices of mass media), over time interpersonal communication and, in the 21st century, mass self-communication have been added as important foci of research. Throughout the history of the field there have been numerous (high profile) analyses pointedly arguing for the reconsideration, dismantling or altogether end of 'mass' media and 'mass' communication theory. Such claims got amplified by the end of the 20th century, coinciding with the introduction of mobile and online media (from the early 1990s) and the rapid rise of social media (from the early 2000s). Today, notions of 'mass' media and 'mass' communication exist side by side (or have altogether collapsed) with interpersonal communication and mass self-communication in a digital, online and interconnected media environment, and these *"three forms of communication coexist, interact, and complement each other rather than substituting for one another".*[4] This map of conceivable communication patterns is a reminder of the possibly subsidiary status of 'mass communication' functions in the total spectrum of mediated communication. It is also a reminder that patterns of communication do not coincide very closely with particular media or even their dominant forms.

Although mass communication, interpersonal communication and mass self-communication coexist and map onto each other in our countless mediated interactions, an argument can still be made for meaningful or even normative distinction. As Fuchs in his assessment of mediated sociality in the context of social distancing under living conditions of the coronavirus crisis, for example suggests: *"Mediated communication can provide some emotional support, but lacks the capacity of touching, feeling, smelling, hugging, etc. one another (...) It is much more difficult to communicate emotions, love, solidarity, and empathy in mediated communication than in face-to-face communication."*[5] On the other hand, research based on the hyperpersonal communication model proposed by Walther[6] shows that, under certain circumstances, interpersonal relationships can develop in computer-mediated communication to a greater extent than they can in face-to-face interactions (see also Hian et al.).[7] Peters has furthermore argued that the privileging of interpersonal communication as a supposedly 'warmer' form of communication may in fact be quite incorrect, in that the opportunities for highly individual experience and sensemaking that mass media and mass communication afford (in other words: how people fill the gap between sending and receiving messages) can in fact be found in any form of conversation.[8] To Peters, mass communication is the most basic form of communication, whereas *"[i]nterpersonal communication could be seen as a series of interlocked acts of mass communication".*[9] In a contemporary context, it can certainly be argued that interactive communication technologies simply multiply opportunities for all forms of conversation, and *"[w]hat has evolved is mass communication, and as a result, the joint effects of mass and interpersonal communication differ from those which they formerly rendered".*[10]

What makes media and communication so important to investigate, is that we constitute the world (and our role in it) through them. Communication is the process of the production and reproduction of sociality, social relations, social structures, social systems, and society. No society nor any kind of social grouping can exist without communication. Our modern, globalised "hypercomplex"[11] sociality necessitates mediated communication – that is, communication across time and space – in order to effectively function and sustain itself.

2   See: FUCHS, C.: Everyday Life and Everyday Communication in Coronavirus Capitalism. In *tripleC,* 2020, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 375-399.
3   LANG, A.: Discipline in Crisis? The Shifting Paradigm of Mass Communication Research. In *Communication Theory*, 2013, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 10-24.

4   CASTELLS, M.: *Communication Power.* Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 55.
5   FUCHS, C.: Everyday Life and Everyday Communication in Coronavirus Capitalism. In *tripleC,* 2020, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 380.
6   See: WALTHER, J. B.: Computer-mediated Communication: Impersonal, Interpersonal, and Hyperpersonal Interaction. In *Communication Research,* 1996, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 3-43.
7   HIAN, L. B. et al.: Getting to Know You: Exploring the Development of Relational Intimacy in Computer-mediated Communication. In *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2006, Vol. 9, No. 3. No pagination. [online]. [2020-05-02]. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/jcmc/article/9/3/JCMC935/4614492>.
8   See: PETERS, J. D.: The Gaps of Which Communication Is Made. In *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 1994, Vol. 11, No. 2, p. 117-140.
9   PETERS, J. D.: The Gaps of Which Communication Is Made. In *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 1994, Vol. 11, No. 2, p. 132.
10   WALTHER, J. B., VALKENBURG, P. M.: Merging Mass and Interpersonal Communication via Interactive Communication Technology: A Symposium. In *Human Communication Research,* 2017, Vol. 43, No. 4, p. 421.
11   For more information, see: QVORTRUP, L.: *The Hypercomplex Society*. New York : Peter Lang, 2013.

Mass media are not the only possible basis for an effective communication network that extends throughout a society. Alternative (non-mass-media) technologies for supporting society-wide networks do also exist (especially the network of physical transportation, the telecommunications infrastructure and the postal system), but these usually lack the society-wide social elements and public roles which media and mass communication has. This is why we care so much what is said and presented in the media, who gets to be seen and heard in the press, what characters, storylines and messages are embedded in our games and entertainment. Media matter.

Media Studies and Communication Science

Media and mass communication are topics among many for the humanities and social sciences, and only one part of a wider field of enquiry into human communication. Under the name "communication science" (within the social sciences) and "media studies" (in the humanities), the field has traditionally focused on media ownership and control, media content and media audiences. In the social sciences, the study of media and mass communication has been defined by Berger and Chaffee as a field which *"seeks to understand the production, processing and effects of symbol and signal systems by developing testable theories, containing lawful generalizations, that explain phenomena associated with production, processing and effects".*[12] While this was presented as a mainstream definition to apply to most research, in fact it is very much biased towards one model of enquiry – the 'objective' quantitative study of communicative behaviour and its causes and effects. It tends to be less successful in dealing with the process by which meaning is given and made in varied social and cultural contexts, and often bypasses the 'why' of communication. It also leaves something to be considered when it comes to questions of power and normative notions of what can be considered to be 'good' and 'just' when it comes to the relations between people, media and society. Likewise, the more qualitative and interpretative traditions more often found within the umbrella term "media studies" are generally not based on replicable methods for the gathering and analysis of data. However, in recent decades the oftentimes sharp divisions between these two fields have blurred,[13] leading to students being trained in both quantitative and qualitative methods, the rise of sophisticated multi-method, mixed method, and triangulation approaches to research, as well as to the emergence of 'hybrid' fields such as digital methods and digital humanities.

Although media studies and communication science study the same or similar processes and objects, these disciplines tend to be grounded in different paradigms.[14] Communication science has been traditionally grounded in a liberal-pluralist ideal of society, where media are considered to have certain functions and uses in society, with effects on audiences direct and linear (modified by social context and individual differences), deploying mostly quantitative research and variable analysis. Media studies, on the other hand, tends to depart from a critical view of society and rejection of value neutrality, with a non-deterministic view of media technology and messages. Research in this tradition adopts interpretative and constructionist perspectives using qualitative methodology with an overall concern with inequality and sources of marginalisation and opposition in society. Especially since the start of the 21st century many scholars have renounced such all-too-easy labelling and categorisation. As Valkenburg remarks about the prospect of combining research on mass, interpersonal and various forms of computer-mediated communication (including mass self-communication): *"Integrative research that crosses different communication subdisciplines is even more sorely needed than a few decades ago."*[15]

In her review of the field, Lang proposes that the two traditional paradigms informing media studies and communication science as fields of inquiry align in their assumption that media and mass communication

are (or can be) powerful agents of change in society, where communication scientists tend to search for evidence (and explanations) for such effects, whereas scholars in the media studies tradition tend to take this powerful role of media for granted, instead opting to explore avenues for critique of the way media operate in society.[16]

Given the extraordinary pluralism and ongoing convergence and hybridisation of the field, it is now impossible to find any single agreed definition of a science or study of communication. Indeed, one could argue that no 'science of communication' and 'study of media' can be independent and self-sufficient, given the origins of the study of media and (mass) communication in many disciplines and the wide-ranging nature of the issues that arise, including matters of economics, law, politics and ethics as well as culture. The study of communication has to be interdisciplinary and must adopt varied approaches and methods.[17] The range of theory, methods and (operational) definitions in the field of media and mass communication research is neither coherent or consensual. Like any other academic field or discipline, communication science and media studies comprise a wide-ranging, heterogeneous, pluralist, at times chaotic and certainly not necessarily consistent body of work.

Theories of Media and Society as Applied to the Coronavirus Crisis

In *McQuail's Media and Mass Communication Theory*,[18] we identify seven fundamental theories that have shaped thinking and research on the role of media in society over the last hundred years or so. I would like to illustrate the continued relevance and applicability of these theories to a number of principal debates and concerns about the role of media and communication in the current global coronavirus crisis.

I. Mass Society

Mass society theory, originally developed and coined in the 1920s and 1930s, gives a primacy to the media as a causal factor. It rests very much on the idea that the media offer a view of the world, a substitute or pseudo-environment, which is a potent means of manipulation of people but also an aid to their psychic survival under difficult conditions. This theory is at work in the widespread fears about media manipulation – for example through so-called 'fake news' and misinformation campaigns by both individuals and institutions. This corresponds with a mass society-inspired view of the public as a mass of atomised people, unable to make sense of reality outside of the messages they are exposed to in the media.

Researchers at UNESCO for example claim – in a report released in April 2020 – that *"COVID-19 disinformation creates confusion about medical science with immediate impact on every person on the planet, and upon whole societies. It is more toxic and more deadly than disinformation about other subjects. That is why this policy brief coins the term disinfodemic".*[19] The report suggests that the consequences of the 'disinfodemic' can even be fatal, and *"citizens are being duped, leaving them unable to understand and implement scientifically-grounded preventive measures. People are dying as a result of complacency, or resorting to false 'cures'."*[20] Survey research by the *Reuters Institute* – released in the same month – about the news and information use of people in Argentina, Germany, South Korea, Spain, the UK and the US suggests that only a minority say they

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12   BERGER, C. R., CHAFFEE, S. H.: The Study of Communication as a Science. In BERGER, C. R., CHAFFEE, S. H. (eds.): *Handbook of Communication Science.* Beverly Hills : Sage, 1987, p. 17.
13   See, for example: BRANNEN, J.: Mixing Methods: The Entry of Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches into the Research Process. In *International Journal of Social Research Methodology,* 2005, Vol. 8, No. 3, p. 173-184.
14   MCQUAIL, D., DEUZE, M.: *McQuail's Media and Mass Communication Theory.* 7th Edition. London : Sage, 2020, p. 87.
15   VALKENBURG, P. M.: Understanding Self-effects in Social Media. In *Human Communication Research,* 2017, Vol. 43, No. 4, p. 487.

16   For more information, see: LANG, A.: Discipline in Crisis? The Shifting Paradigm of Mass Communication Research. In *Communication Theory,* 2013, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 10-24.
17   See: MCQUAIL, D.: *Media Accountability and Freedom of Publication.* Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2003.
18   See: MCQUAIL, D., DEUZE, M.: *McQuail's Media and Mass Communication Theory.* 7th Edition. London : Sage, 2020.
19   POSETTI, J., BONTCHEVA, K.: *Disinfodemic: Deciphering COVID-19 Disinformation. Policy Brief 1.* Paris : UNESCO, 2020, p. 2. [online]. [2020-05-02]. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/disinfodemic_deciphering_covid19_disinformation.pdf>.
20   POSETTI, J., BONTCHEVA, K.: *Disinfodemic: Deciphering COVID-19 Disinformation. Policy Brief 1.* Paris : UNESCO, 2020, p. 3. [online]. [2020-05-02]. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/disinfodemic_deciphering_covid19_disinformation.pdf>.

have come across a lot or a great deal of false or misleading information. Most of this information comes from ordinary people, while most respondents report high levels of trust in scientists and experts.[21]

It could be argued that society today is, in many ways, quite different from the 'mass society' as it existed in the early 20th century, and it would be hard to argue that in today's interconnected world of digital media people still can be seen as atomised individuals. On the other hand, we live in a media context where people are sending more than that they are receiving, so a "reverse atomisation" of the public can be said to be taking place, as no one listens when everyone speaks.[22]

II. Political Economy

Political-economic theory, articulated in the mid-20th century but based on a range of social and economic theorists and sociologists working in the late 19th century (including, most prominently, Karl Marx), is a socially critical approach that focuses primarily on the relation between the economic structure and dynamics of media industries and the ideological content of media. From this point of view, the media institution has to be considered as part of the economic system, with close links to the political system. As media industries accumulate wealth, their status and close relation to vested interests grows. The consequences are to be observed in the reduction of independent media sources and marginalising of alternative voices, concentration on the largest markets and products aimed at the lowest common denominator to attract a mass audience, and an avoidance of risks.

This theory seems to be embraced by those, who are wary of the ways legacy news organisations choose to cover the coronavirus, often embracing consensual, nationalist and patriotic overtones in their reporting, supporting government efforts and admonishing the public to comply with 'stay at home' orders. What this theory also would explain is a general reluctance of the media to pay much attention to the (growing) inequalities in society, which are in part amplified by the shift toward online communication (in learning and work, as well as in social life) and the expectation that people can simply stay 'waiting' at home until the economy would start up again and they can get back to work – while mortgage, electricity, car, media and other payments are still due.

On the other hand, it is exactly the global proliferation and professionalisation of journalisms, in part enabled through international media companies and the networks and platforms of multinational corporations, that exposes us to multiple viewpoints and perspectives, as well as a vast variety of news and information sources. Interestingly, the political economy-inspired critiques of journalism often expect newsworkers to be dispassionate, to report the facts objectively (without corporate or political influence), to serve the public – ignoring the difficult dual role reporters fulfil as both observers and participants in this pandemic, experiencing trauma, frustration and heartbreak as much as covering it. It is through such types of critique we are perhaps guilty of setting journalism up to fail, ignoring the diversity in contemporary journalisms all over the world.[23]

III. Functionalism

Functionalist theory, also rooted in the social theories of the late 19th and early 20th century (specifically those of Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim, later on refined by Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton) explains social practices and institutions in terms of the 'needs' of the society and of individuals. Society is viewed as an organic system of linked working parts or subsystems, each making an essential contribution to continuity and order – even though functionalists generally do not assume such stability or equilibrium can ever be achieved (nor that this should be preferable). The media can be seen as one of these systems. Organised social life is said to require the continued maintenance of a more or less accurate, consistent, supportive and complete picture of the working of society and of the social environment. It is by responding to the demands of individuals and institutions in consistent ways that the media achieve unintended benefits for the society as a whole.

Although functionalism is not really used all that much in contemporary scholarship anymore, it still relates in many ways in which we make sense of the media in society. An example of this is the current rush among both policymakers, software developers, and medical organisations to develop (and celebrate) myriad forms of digital health applications, from corona-contact tracing apps on smartphones to direct-to-consumer (or on-demand) telemedicine, automated bots that screen and refer patients, telehealth visits by doctors or nurses, up to electronic intensive care unit monitoring programmes, which allow nurses and physicians to remotely monitor the status of patients in multiple hospitals. The underlying assumption in all of this is that media and communication technologies – hardware and software – can serve the function of keeping people healthy and helping patients to recover, thereby relieving or even replacing medical staff and curtailing the further spread and impact of the coronavirus. Within a functionalist reading of this development belongs an appreciation of the conflict and tensions that come with the process to 'medialise' medicine, for example regarding privacy concerns of contact-tracing apps on smartphones, the dehumanisation of proposed telemedical protocols, concerns about technological inequalities within and across hospitals and regions of the world, so on and so forth.

The media, in this view, would serve to allow for both the voices of conformity and resistance, thereby keeping the overall social system more or less intact. From such a perspective one could also argue that misinformation and 'fake news' are an inevitable (and perhaps even necessary, albeit not equal) counterpart to the authoritative voices of experts and expert systems (such as professional journalism).

IV. Social Constructivism

Social constructivism is an abstract term for a very broad and influential tendency in the social sciences, sparked off especially by the publication of Berger and Luckmann's book *The Social Construction of Reality* (published in 1967),[24] which was updated to account specifically for the role of media and mass communication in Couldry and Hepp's book *The Mediated Construction of Reality* (published in 2016).[25] In this theory, the notion of society as an objective reality pressing on individuals is countered with the alternative (and more liberating) view that the structures, forces and ideas of society are created by human beings, continually recreated or reproduced and also open to challenge and change. In Couldry and Hepp's account, these continuous challenges and changes are considered as inseparable from the structuring role media play in all aspects of life, and particularly in the dependence of society's institutions on media to perform their functions.[26]

Constructivism plays a role in the current articulation of concerns, such as for example by the World Health Organisation, about an "infodemic" of proportions equal to that of the virus. Similarly, as mentioned before, such notions are present in UNESCO's choice of "disinfodemic" as the term used to describe the role especially social media play in the pandemic. Such a notion, that it is as dangerous for people to live in a mediated reality constructed out of fake news, misinformation, rumours and lies as it is for people to contract a potentially deadly virus is in part premised on an expectation that people, through their reception and use of both traditional and social media, in fact create their own reality which is just as 'real' as any 'objective' reality would be. In such a reality a belief in false 'cures' and attributing the blame for the virus to for example

21   For more information, see: KLEIS NIELSEN, R. et al.: *Navigating the 'Infodemic': How People in Six Countries Access and Rate News and Information about Coronavirus.* [online]. [2020-05-02]. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/infodemic-how-people-six-countries-access-and-rate-news-and-information-about-coronavirus>.
22   See: DEUZE, M.: No One Listens When Everyone Speaks: On the Future of Media in Media Life. In *Mediapolis: Revista de comunicação, jornalismo e espaço público*, 2017, Vol. 4, p. 11-37.
23   For more information, see: WITSCHGE, T., DEUZE, M.: From Suspicion to Wonder in Journalism and Communication Research. In *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2020, Vol. 97, No. 2. No pagination. Published 'Online First'. [online]. [2020-05-02]. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1077699020912385>.

24   See: BERGER, P. L., LUCKMANN, T.: *The Social Construction of Reality*. Garden City, New York : Anchor Books, 1967.
25   See also: COULDRY, N., HEPP, A.: *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2016.
26   For more information, see: COULDRY, N., HEPP, A.: *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2016.

the introduction of 5G as the new standard for wireless communication technologies could have dire consequences.

Constructivism also plays a powerful role in the current massive global shift of teaching and learning to digital and online environments in the contact of the pandemic. As social distancing becomes the norm and schools and universities close, pupils and students are expected to keep on learning (and educators to keep on teaching) online, using a rather bewildering variety of tools, platforms and procedures. The belief and expectation that the interactive options offered by all these technologies provide a more or less equal substitute for in-class, in-person learning guides this shift (and much of the enthusiasm behind it). Although putting one's courses and materials online is not the same as online teaching and learning, especially the focus on interaction offered by video conferencing, chat sessions and e-mail exchanges suggests a powerful constructivist understanding of education that warrants attention. Media scholarship on interactivity is nuanced about its promise and ambivalent on its consequences.

V. Communication Technology Determinism

There is a long and still active tradition of searching for links between the dominant communication technology of an age and key features of society. There is a common element of 'media-centrism' in such theories. While a *media-centric* approach in such work would assume contemporary media to be a cause of changes in society, public opinion and people's behaviour, a more nuanced *media-centred* perspective place media at the centre of society's institutions and activities, through which any and all social and political transformations are shaped and structured (as occurs in media theories inspired by social constructivism). In a deterministic frame of reference regarding media and communication technology, there is a tendency to concentrate on this potential for (or bias towards) social change as brought about by a particular communication technology and to subordinate other variables.

A magnitude of contemporary reports, studies and news stories about the perceived role and influence of social media in the global pandemic (as for example referenced earlier) speaks to such a deterministic perspective. Social media are either said to bring out the best of people, offering channels of support, humour and kindred spirit, allowing people to express their experiences of living through a global pandemic (alone) at home, offering a virtual 'safety net'. A similar media-centric logic is at work in claims toward the opposite direction, placing the blame squarely on social media for disseminating fake news and misinformation about the coronavirus, fomenting conspiracy theories and amplifying the voices of hatred, racism and fear throughout society.

VI. Information Society

The term "information society" originated in Japan in the 1960s, although its genealogy is predominantly traced to the concept of the "post-industrial society" first proposed by Daniel Bell in 1973.[27] This media-society theory belongs to a scholarly tradition that relates types of society to succeeding stages of economic, technological and social development. The main characteristics of the post-industrial society were found in the rise in the service sector of the economy relative to manufacture or agriculture, and thus the predominance of 'information-based' work. Information-based work (scientific, expert, data-based) becomes the key factor in the economy, outstripping physical plant and land as bases of wealth. Correlatively, a 'new class' has been emerging based on the possession of knowledge and personal relations skills. Most of the observed post-industrial trends were seen to accelerate in the last quarter of the 20th century. The production and distribution of information of all kinds, especially using computer-based network technology, have themselves become a major sector of the economy. Contemporary iterations of this type of theory are

known as the "network society" – grounded in the early observations of Jan van Dijk (published in 1992)[28] and Manuel Castells (published in 1996),[29] underscoring a notion of globally networked "interconnectedness" (of economic, political, cultural and social life) at the heart of how contemporary society works.

Observations and assumptions about such an information or "network" society have been visible in a documented particularity of this crisis: the coincidence of *virology* and *virality*. Not only did the virus itself spread very rapidly in China and around the world, but so did the information – and disinformation – about the outbreak via social as well as traditional media, which influences the risk perceptions (and anxiety, even at times panic as well as opposition and protest) among the public on a global scale. In fact, one early study has documented that the spread of the virus was preceded by the spread of people searching for information about the virus and the symptoms of infection using *Google*, *Baidu* and *Sina Weibo* by 1-2 weeks.[30]

This suggests an almost real-life instance of a proposition found in science fiction – especially in one of the first and quite possibly most entertaining analyses of the human condition in cyberspace: the 1992 novel *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson. In Stephenson's vision of our near-future world national governments have collapsed and commercial enterprise rules supreme. The world is divided into 'burbclaves' (suburban enclaves) run by competing corporations. In this extremely competitive, frantically-paced post-national world – in the book Stephenson calls it 'Reality' – the cultural, economic and intellectual elite spends most of its time in the 'Metaverse': a virtual world that people log into and experience via goggles and earphones. The plot of the book chronicles attempts by its main protagonists to prevent a group of religious fundamentalists unleashing a virus onto the world that not only affects computer networks, but also acts on a biological level as it reduces those who come into contact with it to people babbling nonsensically – all in the same language, all slaves to those who can manipulate this primal language. This biolinguistic virus is called 'Snow Crash'.[31] It almost seems that the parallel fears about the pandemic and (dis)infodemic mirror the dramatic developments of such a 'snow crash', theoretically inspired by a media-centred reading of the interconnectedness of our global network society.

VII. Mediatization

At the start of the 21st century, it has become clear that media and mass communication are not just acting upon established processes in society, but are also creating routines within and across society's institutions. Whereas earlier 'grand theories' of media-society relationships were grounded in paradigms from established humanities and social scientific disciplines such as economics and sociology, media scholars (generally hailing from Scandinavian countries, German-speaking countries, and across Latin America) proposed "mediatization" as a sensitising concept. As Stig Hjarvard, in an early attempt to define the concept, suggests, the "mediatization" of society refers to a phase or process *"whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic. This process is characterized by a duality in that the media have become integrated into the operations of other social institutions, while they also have acquired the status of social institutions in their own right. As a consequence, social interaction – within the respective institutions, between institutions, and in society at large – take place via the media"*.[32]

Given the concurrence of virality and virology and its infodemic properties (of disseminating 'false' cures, inciting xenophobic hatred and racism, targeting and attacking journalists and medical experts, and furthering the politicisation of the virus), the pandemic is certainly to some extent also a mediatized

27   See: BELL, D.: *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. New York : Basic Books, 1973.

28   For more information, see: VAN DIJK, J. A. G. M.: *De Netwerk-Maatschappij*. Houten, NL : Bohm Staffen von Loghum, 1992.
29   See: CASTELLS, M.: *The Information Age. Vol. I: The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford : Blackwell, 1996.
30   For more information, see: CUILIAN, L. et al.: Retrospective Analysis of the Possibility of Predicting the COVID-19 Outbreak from Internet Searches and Social Media Data. In *Eurosurveillance: Europe's Journal on Infectious Disease Surveillance, Epidemiology, Prevention and Control*, 2020, Vol. 25, No. 10. No pagination. [online]. [2020-05-02]. Available at: <https://www.eurosurveillance.org/content/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2020.25.10.2000199>.
31   DEUZE, M.: *Media Life*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2012, p. 161.
32   HJARVARD, S.: The Mediatization of Society: A Study of Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change. In *Nordicom Review*, 2008, Vol. 29, No. 1, p. 113.

phenomenon. Mediatization concerns are also at work in the normative expectations of both journalists covering the crisis as well as those engaging in crisis communication on behalf of governments and medical institutions. Pundits and professionals alike expect journalists and other communicators to focus on effective and truthful communications, talking not just *to* but also *with* the public, being supportive of the overall efforts to prevent the spread of infections (cf. to 'flatten the curve'), to factcheck all claims, and to refrain from sensational and otherwise overly emotional coverage. All of these expectations are grounded in a belief, that what journalists and other communicators do in media matters to how people act and feel – a belief deeply informed by a perspective of a mediatized world.

It is perhaps also not surprising, from this point of view, that most of the debates and discussions about the pandemic do not just concern the virus and its impact, but focus especially on the roles of expert information provision, news coverage, government communications, and social media. It is clear that the coronavirus pandemic is a mediatized event as much as it is a virus that infects millions of people around the world.

Conclusion

What I have hoped to show in this article, is the continued relevance of media and mass communication theories (old and new) in making sense of developments affecting the lives of everyone on this planet, regardless of their genealogies – often tracing back to the 19th century. As scholarly disciplines, media studies and communication science, both separately and (preferably) integrated, speak volumes about nearly every aspect of the current global pandemic. Insights from these fields of study inform how people do their work, how the public perceives the risk, experiences (and expresses) the lived reality of social distancing and quarantine, and how institutions function in society. As such, (mass) media and communication do not exist in a vacuum, but are very much part and parcel of what happens in people's lives, for better or worse. Tracing the antecedents of foundational theories of our discipline(s) additionally helps us to make sense of the assumptions grounding and guiding responses to the crisis, which hopefully inspires nuanced approaches further down the line, when all of us have had more time to digest, reflect, ponder and wonder about what happened.

All of this comes together in the dual convergence happening right now: of traditional and new media systems, and of all spheres of life in the 'supra-locale' of the home. As Fuchs articulates: *"Activities that humans usually perform in different social roles at different times in different locales converge in activities conducted in one universal, tendentially unzoned and unstructured space-time in one locale, the home."*[33] Many people – as sources in news reports, self-presenting or expressing themselves in social media online – talk about feeling exhausted, overtired, run down at the end of each day. This is due in part to the collapse of life in media, at home. In psychology, this is explained through self-complexity theory proposed by Linville in 1985: we usually develop multiple aspects and corresponding presentations of our self in different roles: as a colleague, a family member, a romantic partner, and so on. Keeping these roles (to some extent) apart generally contributes to our overall sense of well-being and helps us to cope with life's ups and downs.[34] As all these roles collapse into the home, in front of a screen, this makes us much more vulnerable to emotional swings. Furthermore, when interacting in front of a camera we tend to do much more 'work' of making contact – operating under the assumption that we need to be aware of (and produce much more) non-verbal cues in order to get our message – our self – across (something Thompson back in 1995 called "mediated quasi-interaction").[35] This leaves dealing with all the affordances and frustrations our technologies provide: delays in signal processing, dropped Internet connections, software demanding updates (or expressing incompatibility), and so on. Additionally, we have to recognise profound digital divides in our societies when it comes to access to, skills to use, and resources to interpret modern information and communication technologies.

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33   FUCHS, C.: Everyday Life and Everyday Communication in Coronavirus Capitalism. In *tripleC*, 2020, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 378.
34   For more information, see: LINVILLE, P. W.: Self-complexity and Affective Extremity. In *Social Cognition,* 1985, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 94-120.
35   See: THOMPSON, J. B.: *The Media and Modernity*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 1995.

Let us just acknowledge, perhaps once more, that media are complex and complicated, that life is as well, and as these converge in the context of the coronavirus pandemic it is impossible – and irresponsible – to expect of ourselves or anyone else to function at normal (let alone peak) efficiency.

The implications of this dual convergence of our media system and the supra-locale of the home are, of course, far from clear – but given the fact that we have developed a century of theories to make sense of all the different ways media and (mass) communication function in society at large, we may need another century to bring it all back to you and me, in our homes, waiting for signals of hope. As the pandemic-infodemic evolves and becomes part of our lives over time, I would argue that media studies and communication science, together and alone, now matter more than ever.

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