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**(from Aeron Davis, Natalie Fenton, Des Freedman and Gholam Khiabany, *Media, Democracy and Social Change: Reimagining Political Communications*, to be published by Sage Publications in autumn 2020. This is a draft only for your own consumption and not for publication or circulation. Thank you!)**

### **A Coronavirus Foreword**

It is April 2020. We are copyediting this volume while in lockdown from our different homes. We wrote this book in the knowledge that media, democracy and society were being radically reconfigured by globalisation, new technologies and neoliberalism. The great financial crash, platform capitalism, legacy media collapses and the rise of right-wing populist leaders were some of the challenging by-products of these shifts. We felt the fields of political communication, journalism and media studies needed to critically engage with such developments more than they had.

Six months after handing over the completed manuscript, it is now apparent that we were writing just prior to an unforeseen global disaster; one whose consequences are set to change the world around us. Covid-19, which soon spread from mainland China to every part of the world in a matter of months, now threatens nations on multiple levels. At the time of writing, over three million people have been infected and over 211,000 people have died. It is likely that these figures will grow many-fold as the virus continues to mutate and spread, having a devastating impact on poorer nations with fewer economic and health resources to call on. Most countries are in a state of protracted lockdown. Economies have simply stopped functioning. Vaccines and other possible health solutions are months if not years away. No nation has a clear exit strategy or idea when or how we will return to business as normal.

It is very difficult to predict when this is all leading. Such is the level of shock to socio-economic and political systems, and such is the potential for multiple domino effects to occur, that any serious forecasts can become redundant in a matter of days. The big question is whether this worldwide event will lead to new paradigm shifts and the kind of grand transformations of societies that took place after World War Two? Or, will the same trends, highlighted and critiqued in this volume, continue as before, as they tended to do after the great financial crash of 2007-8?

At this point, we can only briefly speculate on what seems fairly apparent in the medium term and attempt to outline some key questions to think about. One such outcome is that four decades of mainstream economic thinking has been turned on its head. Stock markets are pogoing up and down. Months of lockdown of non-essential employment is proving disastrous to many sectors, from manufacturing to retail, international airlines to Hollywood. Millions are being made unemployed every day. Treasury departments and central banks in wealthier economies are scrambling to keep companies afloat, boost benefit schemes and maintain capital flowing through their economies. To do so, they are borrowing or inventing quantities of capital at levels they previously said were impossible.

The economic impact is clearly not being felt evenly. The ability of poorer economies to lockdown their peoples, borrow to stay afloat and prevent mass infections, is far more limited. Precarious workers, on zero hours or temporary contracts, are the first to be let go. Large numbers of people have little or no savings to keep them going and minimal spaces to relocate to for extended periods of lockdown. Debts – whether personal, corporate or public – are skyrocketing.

Whenever the dust eventually clears, it will be extremely hard to go back to neoliberal economic norms. Debts, including sovereign debt, will be unserviceable. Many companies and whole industries will either be bust, have crippling debts or be nationalised. As in wartime, much larger parts of the economy will have to be state-managed. Governments will have to decide what parts of the economy to save and what to let go. So much for the once dominant logics of free markets, privatization, austerity economics and ‘magic money trees’. But, if they are gone, what alternative schools of economic thought might take their place?

Globalisation is rapidly moving into reverse. It was already slowing in the wake of the financial crisis, rising trade barriers and with a new cohort of nationalist-populist leaders. But now, many international flows and exchanges have come to an abrupt halt. More than 90% of flights have stopped. Borders have been solidly closed. Powerful states are competing ever more viciously for precious health equipment on international markets. Economic unions, such as the European Union, are coming under increasing strain as nations, of necessity, seek alternative social and economic solutions. International investment has stopped and international bodies, like the UN, WHO and OECD, pinball between opposing national agendas. What vision of globalisation will emerge from the crisis and which states are likely to be more dominant in any new world order?

While neoliberal economic norms may be crumbling before our eyes, governments around the globe are desperately trying to assert command and control policies with dramatic consequences for democratic rights. The difference between government responses lies not in a better healthcare provision in countries with less casualties but their governments’ repressive measures and serious restrictions in circulation of information. The bourgeoisie, which according to the *Communist Manifesto*, had drawn ‘even the most barbarian nations into civilisation’ by rapid improvement of instruments of production and the means of communication, is increasingly using barbarian means and policies to roll back the most civilised gains of people everywhere. The evidence is undeniable. In the UK reports of domestic violence have increased by 50% in recent weeks; and abortion rights are under attack in the United States, Britain and Poland (Marty, 2020; Sowemimo, 2020; Walker, 2020). The Modi government in India suspended the ban on prenatal sex testing and disclosure of the sex of foetuses that had been introduced to stop selective abortion of female foetuses (Bose, 2020). Women represent 70% of the health and social sector workforce globally and carry the significant burden of caring for elderly relatives and children and yet they have become one of the main targets of assorted government responses in the current crisis. A large number of employed women work part-time and under the most uncaring and uncertain working conditions, and these are precisely the kind of jobs that are at risk. Pandemics affects women and men differently (Lewis, 2020).

Contrary to government propaganda everywhere, Covid-19 discriminates. African-American people represent 13% of the United States population but over one-third of the victims of Covid-19 have been black. In Britain, according to a black health activist, ‘whilst BME communities account for 14% of the UK population, they make up 44% of NHS doctors and 24% of nurses. But 70% of front-line workers who have died are BME’ (Farah, 2020). In Britain black and Asian people are more than twice as likely to be affected than white people (Fekete, 2020) and we see similar pictures in other countries. Indigenous people in Brazil and other Latin American nations as well as aboriginal people in Australia are at a much higher risk. The link with racism is also apparent in the rapid rise of racial abuse and violence in general and towards Chinese communities in particular. The death toll in refugee camps is

also on the rise and the overcrowding, lack of medical facilities and basic provisions represent a frightening scenario.

As governments begin to contemplate the date of resuming ‘business as normal’, the normal business of repression and war of many communities and countries has not been suspended. Kashmir remains under permanent lockdown and repression and restriction has intensified with Modi’s decision to extend the high speed internet ban in the region; Israel’s bombing and the siege of Gaza has continued as the world diverts its gaze elsewhere; Saudi Arabia might have restricted air travel but not for the fighter jets that bomb Yemen; the tragedy of Syria continues; the failed state of Libya is failing even more; and the United States continues to pursue its aggressive and inhuman sanctions against a number of countries. Yet all our mainstream news channels are dominated by one thing: Covid-19.

The coronavirus crisis which has highlighted the devastating impact of the erosion of democratic processes and institutions, is being used to introduce and implement new restrictions. In March 2020, research by openDemocracy revealed that parliaments in 13 countries were partially or fully suspended, leaving more than 500 million people unrepresented (Provost et al, 2020). Around the world, addressing the current crisis is managed not through investment in health care but through punishment. In Kenya the police are beating and killing people. In India migrant workers are beaten and sprayed with chemicals and thousands of workers – old, young and children - are forced to walk hundreds of miles to return home to self-isolate. In the Philippines, poor people who have violated the curfew are put in dog cages; and in Paraguay people are beaten and threatened with tasers. A new policy passed by Hungary’s parliament is allowing Prime Minister Orban to rule by decree and in the Philippines and Thailand a state of emergency has been declared (Ratcliffe, 2020). It is not just that the lockdown has temporarily stopped the wave of pro-democracy/anti-neo-liberal protests and revolts which had dominated the political landscapes in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, France, and many more countries. Governments are preparing for the protests that are surely to come when the devastating impact of job losses and poverty become even more visible. Such assaults on the democratic rights of citizens, carried out in the name of protecting them, is already part of the strategy of political establishments around the world for tackling the crisis. The ‘herd’ has no immunity under Covid Capitalism. In the calmer political climate of Britain, the human rights organisation Liberty has labelled new emergency laws introduced as part of the government’s response to Covid-19 as the ‘biggest restriction of our freedom in a generation’ (Liberty, 2020). Fekete has rightly warned us that history ‘teaches us that inhumane police practices are quick to establish but hard to dismantle with long-term consequences for policing by consent within a democratic order’ (2020).

Meanwhile, political parties and the recent resurgence of populist right-wing politicians continues along with the drive towards nationalism. Tub-beating, ‘strong’ leaders are looked to in times of national crisis. Experts remain conflicted as those in health, business and politics are confronted with new problems they have no immediate answers for. Public support for leaders like Donald Trump, Boris Johnson and Jair Bolsonaro remained fairly robust in the early months of the crisis. However, it is also likely that the relatively slow responses of these regimes will also lead to some of the highest death tolls too. Months if not years of economic crisis is also likely to dent their poll ratings. Will the hardships endured on the ground – the loss of jobs, demise of democratic rights and death of thousands of people – lead to a new rise in radical left-wing parties or a return to technocratic centrist politics? In the UK, a raft of activism has emerged over sick pay, police powers, protection and rights for

care-workers and nurses, food supplies and universal basic income all of which highlight the fundamental social inequalities that a pandemic exposes and that we refer to throughout this book. Alongside the protest, local mutual aid groups are emerging, often organising online in an attempt to respond to the daily consequences of a lockdown for the sick and the vulnerable and highlighting the cracks of a decimated welfare system.

The pandemic has certainly intensified some of the trends that we highlight in the rest of this book. The state is now forced into playing an interventionist role in national life – coordinating bail outs, presiding over lockdowns, and disseminating propaganda and public relations – that many theorists deemed to be impossible with the alleged hollowing out of the state under neoliberalism. Coronavirus has provided the authorities with an opportunity to ramp up surveillance under the guise of mass testing, tracing and identification but also, as in the case of Hungary and South Africa, to weaken press freedom by introducing new laws on the publication of ‘false information’ that increases states’ oversight over the right to free expression. It is also the case that with newspapers facing economic meltdown due to the collapse in advertising revenue, the state is now being asked by the news industry to step in and underwrite the journalism that is now defined as an ‘essential service’. In the case of the UK, this is particularly ironic given that the press campaigned long and hard against effective regulation on the basis that it would lead to unwarranted state ‘intrusion’ into the industry.

Another preoccupation of this book concerns the extent to which the balance of power in the political communications landscape is tilting away from traditional news media and towards digital intermediaries. It is certainly true that the digital giants will be the ones to benefit: Amazon is flourishing amid the pandemic with Jeff Bezos adding over £19bn to his fortune in the first quarter of 2020. Google and Facebook have joined forces to develop a contact tracing app that could see private industry partnering with public agencies in an almighty data grab with huge commercial advantage for Big Tech.

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Concerns over ‘fake news’ have also come to the fore once more. However, preliminary reports into the scale of misinformation suggests that, despite World Health Organisations claims of an ‘infodemic’, a majority of misleading reports consist of repurposing existing claims about, for example, remedies, rather than outright fabrication (Brennen et al, 2020). Ofcom, the UK’s communications regulator, found that nearly half of all respondents had encountered some false or misleading information but that, to the extent they came across this misinformation in closed groups or social media, these were also the least trusted platforms (Ofcom, 2020). This does not fully compensate for the harm done by populist leaders, such as those in Italy, Brazil, Hungary and the US, who have used their own channels to propagate racist conspiracy theories and to challenge emerging scientific consensus on Covid-19 but it does suggest some limits to the impact of deliberate misinformation.

Perhaps a more significant issue – and one that we deal with throughout this volume – is the residual political impact of the mainstream news media precisely because it tends to trade less in outright distortion than in more subtle agenda-setting that promotes elite frames. Many established news organisations saw huge increases in traffic and ratings as publics desperately tried to make sense of the pandemic. The European Broadcasting Union reported a 20% increase in audiences for news bulletins of public service broadcasters while in the UK, 27 million people (around 40% of the entire population) viewed the prime minister’s announcement of lockdown on television with a further 24 million turning in to watch the Queen’s ‘broadcast to the nation’. Meanwhile the *Guardian*, *Financial Times* and *Telegraph* all recorded record figures for their online content, evidence that legacy outlets were

particularly well placed to benefit from this spike in interest given the global scale of the pandemic. Furthermore, predictions of the inexorable decline of the BBC (under pressure from commercial rivals like Netflix together with changing patterns of media consumption) would appear to be a little premature when Ofcom figures show that 82% of the online population regularly turned to the BBC for news and information about Covid-19 with 36% of them identifying the BBC as their *main* source of information, far above any other platform (Ofcom, 2020). Mainstream media are playing a hugely significant role in how the crisis is narrated and, crucially, in framing the debate about what kind of changes societies will need to make following the pandemic.

Yet, despite some impressive examples of comprehensive and critical reporting, fact-checking and scrutinising, there have been repeated examples across different environments of a failure systematically to interrogate government responses. Instead there is a propensity to amplify official statements in endless bland press briefings and to reproduce the slogan that ‘we’re all in this together’. Of course, even a global pandemic does not magically transcend pre-existing political loyalties so there was far more criticism in liberal US cable news networks of, for example, Donald Trump’s haphazard steering of the crisis than there was of the UK government’s actions concerning testing and tracing across the majority of the British press.

Two consequences flow from this. First, that those welcome examples of hard-hitting journalism do not signify a durable or profound radicalisation of our political communications systems but instead simply illustrate the depth of the social and economic crisis today – a classic example of ‘indexing’. Second, that even the increased audiences and occasional outburst of truth-telling have failed to ~~reverse~~ <sup>regain</sup> the public’s trust in a media contaminated by too many years of accommodation with elite power and corporate priorities. Whilst traditional outlets are certainly trusted more than social media platforms, a series of polls carried out after the outbreak of the pandemic found that journalists were among the least credible sources of information and that, according to a 10-country survey carried out by Edelman (2020), employers were trusted far more than governments and media with officials and journalists ‘at the bottom of the rank’. A poll for Kekst CNC in April 2020 found that there had been a significant decline in public confidence in the media in Germany, US, UK and Sweden and that the media were, across the board, the worst performing sector (Kekst CNC, 2020). It seems that even a crisis as serious as the coronavirus is not going to restore the credibility of our dominant political communications actors.

Instead, what we need more than ever is a fiercely independent and critical media that truly ‘comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable’ – neither the risk-averse stenography of much public service broadcasting nor the clickbait of online media. We do not know how life will change after coronavirus but, just as huge questions are being asked about our political priorities and economic norms, we must make sure that our political communications systems do not return to ‘normal’ service.