

Editorial

Countering or Reinforcing (Gendered) Inequalities? Ramifications of the Covid-19 Pandemic in and Through Media

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic reveals and exacerbates inequalities in various ways. Gender inequalities—intertwined with intersectional differences along class, ethnicity, or origin—are highly visible. Legacy and social media around the world cover and perform these issues as much as they conceal them. On the one hand, they have the ability to give those affected a voice and to intervene in public discourse. On the other hand, they reproduce stereotypes and imbalances and rely on gendered (infra)structures. This thematic issue explores the entanglement between empowering and restricting forms of media discourse and media practices. Ten contributions from different world regions, which analyze various media, and involve diverse methodological approaches, make visible reproductions of established power structures as well as new visibilities and counter-practices of marginalized groups. In sum, they generate a complex body of knowledge about global and local inequalities and the ramifications of the pandemic in and through media.

Keywords

Covid-19; gender and representation; gender gaps; gender inequalities; global inequalities; intersectionality; marginalization; visibility

Issue

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1. Introduction

At the time of this thematic issue’s publication, the Covid-19 pandemic is entering its fourth year. In many countries, newer waves of infection are passing through increasingly immunized populations. In others, the risk of more severe disease transmission is still high. The end of this global pandemic is hard to predict. Likewise, researchers of all disciplines are still analyzing and evaluating the diverse and differing political actions and related economic, social, and cultural distortions across the globe. The pandemic also evoked much media research. “Infodemia” became a buzzword of the time, while conspiracy ideologies received unprecedented public attention. Covid-19 emerged as a distinct

subject, a “critical moment” (Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021a) to observe the influences of an extraordinary crisis on media discourses, publics, and practices. It also provided a chance to study the changes in journalism, activism, and the ways people organize their work and social lives through media.

While the pandemic was global and spared no one, it became clear that its impact did not affect everyone equally. Social structures of inequality—global and local—persisted with the emergence of Covid-19 and were even reinforced by it. Both the risk of becoming seriously ill and the burdens associated with the pandemic’s effects were, and are, unequally distributed. This is only partly reflected in the literature on public communication during the pandemic.

Overviewing the impressive academic output, gendered patterns, and gaps in media representation and media practice form only a small part of the pandemic-related media scholarship's agenda. The rather limited efforts to reveal gendered dimensions of media production, representation, and practice may be considered odd given that the pandemic's impacts themselves show highly gendered structures. Gender inequalities—intertwined with intersectional differences along class, age, ethnicity, or country of origin—have been highly visible in recent years. Women, especially those with lower income working in precarious conditions, were more often affected by job losses (Agarwal et al., 2022). Women also shouldered the main burden of childcare and homeschooling, and domestic violence rose during lockdowns (Hester, 2022). Care work, in particular—be it medical care work in hospitals or unpaid care work at home—is highly gendered and thus exacerbates inequalities in this crisis, which are manifested globally in very different forms and intensities.

Those engaged in gender media studies, of course, headed to pandemic inequalities and their negotiation in (social-)media publics—whether in Zimbabwe (Tshuma et al., 2022), China (Zhang, 2022), Jordan (Al-Serhan et al., 2022), the US (Shugars et al., 2021), the UK (Pedersen & Burnett, 2021), or elsewhere. The keyword “COVID” generates 67 results in the archive of the influential journal *Feminist Media Studies* (as of February 14, 2023), which also dedicated a commentary and critics section (Vol. 20, Issue 6) to feminist “responses to the coronavirus crisis” (Kennedy, 2020) in summer 2020. Inter alia, the backlash of traditional gender roles and the renewed pushing back of (many) mothers to the private sphere of caring were analyzed as subjects of media discourse and participation.

Following feminist and intersectional research agendas, this thematic issue is intended to focus explicitly on the hitherto scattered research on gender and further dimensions of marginalization as generated by and represented in the media in the context of the pandemic. Moreover, it is intended to collect insights on a global scale, avoiding Western bias. In doing so, we attempt to complement influential selections of pandemic-related media research with no dedicated focus on gender and marginalization, such as *Journalism and the Pandemic* (Tumber & Zelizer, 2022), *Covering Covid-19: The Coronavirus Pandemic as a Critical Moment for Digital Journalism* (Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021b), *PandeMedia: How Covid-19 Has Affected the Role of Media in Society* (Lundtofte & Johansen, 2023), or *Global Pandemics and Media Ethics* (Chari & Ndlela, 2023).

The contributions included in this collection originate from very different world regions, tapping into heterogeneous issues and challenges. With regard to the media they engage with, the articles analyze and represent today's multifaceted means of public expression: from legacy media to social media, from text and images to maps, from journalism to strategic communication

and media activism. In sum, they mirror the multiple arenas and various practices in “hybrid media systems” (Chadwick, 2013) and allow for a nuanced analysis of “performative publics” (Lünenborg & Raetzsch, 2018) in which different groups of actors join in with converging or unique practices of public connection. The methods used and developed are also diverse: they include discourse and content analysis, netnography, social network analysis, quantitative surveys, and qualitative interviews. Taken together, the work presented here generates a complex body of knowledge about global and local inequalities and the ramifications of the pandemic in and through media.

2. Women at the Margins of the Pandemic: Male Protagonists, Masculine Rhetoric, and Anti-Feminism

A persistent criticism within the debate on gendered inequalities is the low share of women and female experts who are given a voice in news and media coverage. This general trend also becomes evident in legacy media covering Covid-19 (Jones, 2020). Beyond the long-standing underrepresentation of women, especially in political coverage, the articles in this thematic issue reveal more nuanced patterns of gendered misrepresentation and media framing. Williams and Greer (2023) address the heavy use of war metaphors in the coverage of the pandemic in Australian reporting. They discuss how such framing emphasizes protective masculinity and re-enforces political and societal gender stereotypes and imbalances. Raman and Kasturi (2023) shed light on the critical situation of volunteer health workers in India during the pandemic. Their analysis of five English language dailies demonstrates the invisibility of female health workers and offers a “political economy of caregiving” that reiterates their recognition. Labio-Bernal and Manzano-Zambruno (2023) present a study on the International Women's Day (8M) demonstrations in Spain. Using content and critical discourse analysis of newspapers and social media accounts, they show how populists and right-wing actors instrumentalized the pandemic to stir up anti-feminist resentment.

3. The Covid-19 Pandemic as a Driver for new Gendered Visibilities and Counter-Practices of Marginalized Groups

Rather than merely reproducing or reinforcing existing inequalities, crises, and social breakdowns have the potential to unveil structural imbalances and routines of everyday life, thus making room for reflection and transformative action (Cozza et al., 2020). They offer opportunities to re-negotiate the status quo, develop imaginaries for future change, and initiate counter-practice to hegemonic social orders. The pandemic led to a broad(er) societal recognition of the fundamental importance of the (female) “ethics of care” (Tronto, 2013) and gave way to new or altered visibilities of women

and those affected by the pandemic's consequences. The increased awareness underpins new forms of political leadership, as well as media and data activism (Milan et al., 2021). Siemon and Reißmann (2023) investigate the gendered formation of two German-speaking care publics on Twitter and explore their potential to break with traditional regimes of visibility. Using social network analysis, their findings point to differing power structures, depending on whether professional or "private" informal care work is addressed. Voina and Stoica (2023) delve into Jacinda Ardern's response to the pandemic in New Zealand. By analyzing her Facebook communication, they show how the prime minister's crisis communication anchors in a feminist ethics of care, strengthening empathy, kindness, and empowerment. Jeppesen and Sartoretto (2023) deal with practices of counter-data mapping. Through three netnographic case studies, they demonstrate creative multimodal ways to react to the hegemonic maps that produce visual misrepresentation and exclude marginalized groups.

4. Intersections of Inequalities

Gendered inequalities do intersect with other categories of social and cultural difference. The pandemic also provides lessons for intersectional (in)visibilities and challenges, unfolding the complexity of living conditions, life phases, differing prerequisites in knowledge acquisition, and their relations to media access, media representation, and media practices. Adlung and Backes (2023) point to the reinforced awareness older women received through the pandemic. They reveal dubious reporting patterns in their analysis of German newspaper articles and related images, centering around stereotyped representations of the "suffering old woman." Khamis and Agboada (2023) scrutinize the access to maternal health information in Ghana during the pandemic and conducted 15 qualitative interviews. Comparing the usage of different sources by expectant mothers in rural and urban areas, they find that rural mothers, in particular, experience notable challenges regarding digital literacy and lack of internet access. Müller et al.'s (2023) research goes into the intersection of gender and working conditions for academics. Based on survey data, they do not find a direct influence of gender on the academic output of communication scholars in Austria, Switzerland, or Germany. However, gender-specific effects established with regard to family situations and partnerships with male scholars are more often found in relationships in which the partner only works part-time. Finally, Melki (2023) contributes with a rare knowledge gap study, which includes gender, on Lebanon as a country that has experienced multiple crises with the uprising, hyperinflation, and governmental collapse. Defying expectations, gender as one variable amongst others was not significant in explaining Covid-19 knowledge acquisition; instead, an indirect relation with the rather high education rate among women in Lebanon is suggested.

5. Conclusions

Overall, the contributions gathered in this thematic issue provide insights into the global inequalities and gaps created by the pandemic, which are reflected, repeated, or even reinforced in media communication. The synopsis of the contributions shows—regardless of their different focuses and approaches—the prolongation of (gendered) inequalities during the pandemic. Regarding media representation, findings from countries from both the Global South and Global North complain about the underrepresentation of women as professional actors and those affected by the pandemic. While such gender inequalities persist globally, we also see national specificities—Jacinda Ardern and her empathetic style of managing the crisis being foremost among them. At the same time, digital media infrastructures became crucial during the global health crisis. These infrastructures enabled activists and ordinary citizens to engage in counter-hegemonic practices and counter the prevailing imbalances and misrepresentations. However, during the pandemic, whether in academia, journalism, professional media reporting, or citizens' information gathering, it became drastically visible that processes of emancipation and pathways toward gender equality can be abruptly thwarted and upstaged, as is often the case in crises.

The panorama of findings given by the articles asks for more research highlighting the relational and performative becoming of publics with respect to specific issues, especially in the shared spaces of social media. This research makes visible the ways in which journalism, non-institutionalized media, politics, science, civil society, and private users reproduce and rework gendered power structures, as well as whether and how their patterns of participation interrelate. In their performative re-iteration, publics emerge as an ongoing dynamic, fluid, and unstable process. To investigate those dynamics in contested issues on a local, national, and global scale is a huge challenge for gender media and communication research, but one worth tackling.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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