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MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps

Volume 11

Issue 1

2023

Open Access Journal

ISSN: 2183-2439

Edited by Margreth Lünenborg, Miriam Siemon, and Wolfgang Reißmann



Media and Communication, 2023, Volume 11, Issue 1
Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps

Published by Cogitatio Press
Rua Fialho de Almeida 14, 2º Esq.,
1070-129 Lisbon
Portugal

Design by Typografia®
<http://www.typografia.pt/en/>

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Available online at: www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication

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MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION
ISSN: 2183-2439

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Editorial

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

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Submitted: 14 February 2023 | Published: 28 February 2023

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

This editorial is part of the issue “Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps” edited by Margreth Lünenborg (Freie Universität Berlin), Miriam Siemon (Freie Universität Berlin), and Wolfgang Reißmann (Freie Universität Berlin).

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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.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all participants of the ICA panel "Women Keep Society Going in Times of Crisis: But Who's Talking About it?" at the virtual conference 2021, where the idea for this thematic issue was born. We thank all the authors whose submissions enabled us to compile a topical, insightful thematic issue on global inequalities related to the pandemic and their ramifications in and through media. We also wish to thank the reviewers for their nuanced and insightful criticism, which was helpful for our decisions and in improving the selected articles. Finally, we wish to thank the editorial team of *Media and Communication*, who managed the publication process smoothly and professionally. This article was enabled by the funding of German

Science Foundation/Deutsche Forschungsgesellschaft (DFG), project number 418375831.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article

All's Fair in Pandemic and War? A Gendered Analysis of Australian Coverage of Covid-19

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Submitted: 21 August 2022 | Accepted: 16 November 2022 | Published: 28 February 2023

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has repeatedly been framed by politicians and the media alike as this generation's "Great War." Metaphors are often used in political reportage as effective discursive tools to influence and persuade readers. War metaphors especially are frequently used in election campaigns, leadership spills, and during times of political unrest to portray politics as a brutal and competitive (masculine) arena. As such, the use of militaristic language and war metaphors to describe the shared challenges during a global pandemic is unsurprising. Framing the pandemic as a war can rally citizens by appealing to their sense of national and civic duty at a moment of crisis. Yet such framing is problematic as it draws on stereotyping cultural myths and values associated with war, reinforcing patriarchal understandings of bravery and service that glorify hegemonic masculinity while excluding women from the public sphere. Using a feminist critical discourse analysis, this article will examine Australian print media coverage of the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on two case studies—the prime minister and "frontline" workers—to further understand the gender bias of mainstream media. We argue that, by drawing on war metaphors in Covid-19 coverage which emphasizes protective masculinity, the media reproduce and re-enforce political and societal gender stereotypes and imbalances.

Keywords

Australian politics; care work; Covid-19; crisis leadership; discourse analysis; gendered mediation; Scott Morrison; war metaphors

Issue

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1. Introduction

When news of SARS-COV-2 landed on Australian shores on 25 January 2020, the nation was put on alert. Having just recovered from the worst bushfires in recorded history, Australians initially paid little attention to the virus and remained relatively untouched by the Covid-19 pandemic until March of that year. Culminating with national border closures on 19 March, in the span of a single week the Australian government banned gatherings of more than 500 people, implemented quarantine rules for international arrivals and forbade the disembarking

of passengers from cruise ships—though Australia notoriously allowed the Ruby Princess to discharge all 2,700 passengers on that same day, which resulted in 662 Covid cases and 28 deaths (O'Sullivan et al., 2020, p. 2). As Australians began to comprehend their new reality in a post-Covid world, politicians and the media were quick to adopt the international rhetoric framing the pandemic as a war. Prime Minister Scott Morrison told Australians that "this is a once-in-100-year type event. We haven't seen this sort of thing in Australia since the end of the First World War" (Harris, 2020). Through this frame, the pandemic became our "Great War," the

virus became our “enemy,” healthcare workers became “frontline” soldiers, and our heads of the state became “wartime leaders.” Australians were encouraged to draw on the “ANZAC spirit” (Dore, 2020b), a coping mechanism established in the wake of the devastation and senseless slaughter brought by the First World War, particularly the Battle of Gallipoli. According to this mythology, “diggers” are first and foremost male, almost always white, brave, loyal to their mates, and willing to honourably sacrifice their lives for the nation. Like diggers past, Australians in 2020 were also expected to make sacrifices and band together—albeit socially distanced—in a national effort to defeat our common foe. Such framing is problematic, however, as it reinforces patriarchal gender norms which exclude women from the narrative. In this article, we will examine newspaper coverage published in the first six months of the pandemic, with a particular focus on how war metaphors were utilised in the respective reportage of the prime minister and “frontline” workers, to further understand the masculinist pandemic narrative.

Metaphors permeate everyday life in language, thought, and action. Conceptual metaphor theorists have shown that concepts are metaphorically structured, providing us with a familiar image to conceptualise unfamiliar phenomena (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 6). As our conceptual system is fundamental to our definition of daily realities, metaphors therefore “shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions” (Lakoff, 2004, p. xv). Metaphors are powerful discursive tools that can convey a certain idea or a specific vision of the world, and so are crucial to political rhetoric. By convincing the public to see reality a certain way, politicians are able to enact concrete policy plans and goals in line with their chosen metaphors (Bates, 2020).

War metaphors are a common discursive tool. They dramatize and often exaggerate the situation, implying a “life-or-death” emergency that requires drastic countermeasures (Musolff, 2022, p. 308). Previous research (Benzi & Novarese, 2022; Castro Seixas, 2021; Trimble, 2017) has shown that war metaphors are a powerful and widespread framing device in political discourse and reportage, used to discuss a range of issues including elections, poverty, AIDS, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. Benzi and Novarese (2022, p. 7) argue that such imagery is enthralling as it “identifies an enemy (the virus), a strategy (to ‘flatten the curve,’ but also to ‘save the economy’), the front-line warriors (health-care personnel), the home front (people isolating at home), and the traitors and deserters (people breaking social-distancing rules).” It induces an emotive and evaluative response by connecting the fight against a virus to “nostalgia for ‘heroic’ historical moments in the collective cultural memory,” ultimately encouraging political trust and compliance (Musolff, 2022, pp. 315–316). However, previous studies examining the use of war metaphors during the Covid-19 pandemic have discovered that such

rhetoric can result in fearful and panicked responses, fuel hatred and antagonism, trigger alienation and division, promote nationalism, legitimise authoritarianism, and is generally unhelpful during crises that call for more inclusive responses (Benzi & Novarese, 2022; Hanne, 2022). While the topic has garnered significant interdisciplinary attention leading to a considerable body of literature, few scholars have yet incorporated a gendered analysis. We argue that it is crucial to apply a gendered lens in the analysis of war metaphors as they are fundamentally patriarchal, drawing on masculinist cultural myths to reinforce hegemonic gender norms, and overlooking this only re-upholds the masculine-as-norm narrative. This article will therefore provide a more critical perspective on this field of study.

A growing number of scholars examining the media coverage of politics have drawn on gendered mediation literature to examine how this coverage reinforces gender norms and power relations. Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross (1996), who first coined the term “gendered mediation,” argue that the media is neither objective nor neutral but rather frames politics through a male-oriented agenda that privileges male politicians while disadvantaging women. Previous research has shown how the media emphasise masculine traits, behaviours, and stereotypes (Gidengil & Everitt, 1999), how women politicians are delegitimised in portrayals that draw on stereotypically feminine characteristics (Falk, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Trimble, 2017; Williams, 2021a) and how such an undue focus on gender, appearance, and personal life can serve to other these women from the (masculine) political norm (Ross & Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2000; Thomas & Bittner, 2017). Few gendered mediation studies, however, specifically focus on male political leaders—unless as a comparative case study to women leaders. Gidengil and Everitt (2000) and Trimble (2017, p. 154) have notably explored the use of war and sports metaphors in election coverage, with the latter arguing that such hypermasculine allegories “frame women’s participation in political competition within norms of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal militarism.” Rather than explore how war metaphors “other” women leaders, we offer a novel case study of the gendered mediation framework by examining how these patriarchal narratives further legitimise male political leaders, especially during times of crisis.

Framing a global health crisis and the subsequent political response through militaristic metaphors reinforces a masculinist view of both politics and society and upholds boundaries that exclude women from the public sphere. While the use of gendered language and metaphor has previously been studied in the realm of political speeches (Philip, 2009), elections (Trimble, 2017), leadership changes (Williams, 2017), and political debates (Charteris-Black, 2004), the political and cultural impact of the Covid-19 pandemic necessitates further study. Despite the burgeoning literature examining the domination of war metaphors in the pandemic, a

tendency to overlook the gendered implications of this phenomenon persists, and few scholars have adopted a gendered framework of analysis. One notable example is a gendered analysis of political cartoons' representation of healthcare workers during the Covid-19 pandemic by Domínguez and Sapiña (2022), who find that war metaphors are one of the dominant narratives, especially when drawing male doctors and healthcare workers, in addition to sports metaphors. This article will build on previous literature with the addition of a feminist critical discourse analysis of media coverage of the Australian government's pandemic response and of healthcare workers on the "frontlines." As we will explore, the use of war metaphors both universalises male narratives and serves to uphold gendered power imbalances.

2. Methods

We chose to focus our analysis on newspapers as they remain an influential source of daily news, often setting the agenda for other media (Carson & McNair, 2018; Trimble, 2017). We restricted the analysis to five mastheads (Table 1), of which three are national and two are state-based, to reflect Australia's print media landscape. We used Factiva, a digital archive, to collect a purposive sample of articles that used war metaphors and, as such, we are not claiming that this is the only metaphor used in media coverage of the pandemic. This included a mix of news, editorials, opinion pieces, and columns. We confined our search to the first six months of the pandemic (March to August 2020) and used keyword searches identified in previous research (Philip, 2009; Trimble, 2017), such as "war," "attack," "defend," "enemy," "battle," "combat," "protect," "shield," and "frontline," to highlight various militaristic metaphors. This resulted in a corpus of 62 articles, a majority of which were published by *The Australian*, a centre-right national broadsheet. Due to the format and nature of political reporting, it was not always possible to distinguish between examples where

the press initiated the use of a war metaphor and cases where they were reusing a metaphor previously used by another journalist, commentator, or even politician. This does not however lessen the impact of each example, as reusing a metaphor nevertheless remains a choice and has the same material effect in perpetuating gendered stereotypes and discourse.

We draw on Semino and Koller's (2009) gender metaphor analysis, which acknowledges how metaphors play a critical role in constructing stereotypical gender identities that advantage men and disadvantage women. They identify three key dimensions of research: gender metaphors that draw on male experiences to describe reality, reifying power asymmetries; metaphors used to refer to women and men; and metaphors used by women and men. This study is concerned with the first dimension.

To identify and interpret the gendered use of war metaphors in describing the pandemic and both political and health responses, we conducted a feminist critical discourse analysis. A feminist critical discourse analysis establishes a comparable critical examination of power and ideology in discourse as critical discourse analysis, yet does so while "guided by feminist principles and insights in theorising and analysing the seemingly innocuous yet oppressive nature of gender as an omnirelevant category in many social practices" (Lazar, 2007, p. 143). Feminist critical discourse analysis seeks to interrogate the various ways in which gendered norms and power imbalances are discursively produced and contested. This form of analysis is a suitable framework for the study of war metaphors, as it allows for interrogation not only of the actual text, but also the latent impact and reinforcement of patriarchal norms and power relations. The agenda-setting role of media organisations, especially in Australia's concentrated media landscape—papers owned by News Corp and Nine Entertainment Co. account for 82% of total print media readership (Brevini & Ward, 2021)—makes a critical analysis of the language

Table 1. Selected newspapers.

Newspaper	Type	Ownership	Location	Political Leaning	Number of Articles
<i>The Guardian Australia</i>	Online	Guardian Media Group	National	Centre-Left	3
<i>The Australian</i>	Broadsheet	News Corp	National	Conservative	33
<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	Broadsheet	Nine Entertainment Co.	New South Wales	Centre-Left	10
<i>The Courier Mail</i>	Tabloid	News Corp	Queensland	Conservative	11
<i>The Australian Financial Review</i>	Broadsheet	Nine Entertainment Co.	National	Centre	5

Notes: News Corp newspapers have been coded "conservative" due to their endorsement of right-wing coalition governments and long-standing conservative agenda in Australia (Hobbs & McKnight, 2014; McKnight, 2003); the *The Sydney Morning Herald*, once considered centre-left (Hobbs & McKnight, 2014), has since moved further to the centre after Fairfax merged with Nine Entertainment Co., currently chaired by former Liberal treasurer Peter Costello, however, it still has a predominantly left-wing audience, though not as many as the more progressive *The Guardian Australia* (Park et al., 2021); as a financial paper, *The Australian Financial Review* is considered politically centrist.

used in crisis reporting essential to ultimately reveal its reproduction of relations of power and inequality. Moreover, the feminist nature of the research requires specifically feminist methods (Lazar, 2005).

3. “Keep Calm and Carry On”: Australian Print Media’s Use of Generalised War Metaphors

On 19 March 2022, as Australia began to face pandemic realities, an *Australian Financial Review* editorial (2020) argued that “the virus war is changing our way of life.” The newly legislated bans on travel and indoor gatherings, the author argued, would “put much of Australian life on hold in ways unheard of since 1945” (2020). Other Australian journalists and commentators, particularly those writing for the centre-right *The Australian*, were quick to adopt war metaphors used by global political leaders in describing the onset of the pandemic (Table 2). The virus itself was frequently personified as the “enemy,” which allowed the public to “comprehend a wide variety of experiences with nonhuman entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 34). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), personification not only hands us a specific way to think about a novel virus and how to respond to it but also provides an intelligible understanding of why we are suffering.

Wartime imagery is compelling during periods of peacetime crisis. It effectively captures public attention and directs it onto the target problem while “the fear evoked by war metaphors also makes them memorable and enduring [which] can motivate people to pay attention, change their beliefs and take action” (Flusberg et al., 2018, p. 7). By associating a global pandemic (unfamiliar concept) with a world war (familiar concept), the Australian press prepared the population for a long and difficult period that would radically depart from the previous norm. Yet war metaphors are deeply rooted in hyper-masculine traditions and patriarchal power imbalances (Trimble, 2017, p. 32). Such rhetoric masculinises the pandemic narrative and privileges responses that embody stereotypically masculine traits, like strength, violence, authority, and rugged individualism. As a result, women are discursively excluded from the narrative despite comprising the majority of healthcare workers and teachers whose jobs place them at high risk of contracting Covid-19.

4. The Patriarchal Protector: The Wartime Prime Minister

The press coverage of then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s pandemic response heavily drew on war metaphors, often framing him as a “wartime” prime

Table 2. Frequently used war metaphor terms.

Term	Example
Fight	Each of us has had to display a measure of endurance as well, as together we <i>fight</i> this invisible <i>enemy</i> . (Jones, 2020b)
Combat	The rhetoric of national leaders, rich with the imagery of <i>military combat</i> and calls for <i>national sacrifice</i> , suggested an explanation of sorts: the pandemic is so <i>monstrous</i> we have plunged into a new form of <i>world war</i> . (Wright, 2020)
Hunt/Kill	Coronavirus is <i>hunting</i> down every one of globalisation’s core doctrines and <i>destroying</i> them. It is the virus <i>sent to kill</i> globalisation. (Sheridan, 2020a)
Strategy	Scott Morrison is right to insist that the states should continue <i>holding the line</i> on the nation’s aggressive suppression <i>strategy</i> to deal with Covid-19. (Dore, 2020c)
War	Around the nation <i>war</i> measures will apply starting on Monday, but a <i>war</i> unlike any today’s Australians have seen. (Kelly, 2020a)
Battle	The nation faces a mighty <i>battle</i> with Covid-19 and all of our resources and <i>personnel</i> must be focused on its <i>defeat</i> . (Richardson, 2020)
Sacrifice	We will win this current health war with the same endurance, courage, mateship and <i>sacrifice</i> that our brave <i>veterans</i> relied upon. (Jones, 2020b)
Courage	We have seen all sorts of <i>courageous</i> acts throughout the coronavirus battle. (Jones, 2020b)
Foe	But this is a time of contagion; governments of every hue are bending established principles to <i>fight</i> a biological <i>foe</i> that has the power to <i>overwhelm defences</i> and <i>destroy</i> our way of life. (Dore, 2020a)
Wartime	Such things can happen in <i>wars</i> and this is as close to a <i>wartime</i> situation as we’re going to experience. We hope. (Carney, 2020)

Note: The authors have used italics to emphasise both the term itself and related words that add emphasis, e.g., “fight” and the related word “enemy.”

minister. This trope positioned Morrison's leadership during a health crisis within the rhetorical context of war, allowing for comparison with past wartime leaders and a particular focus on the performative elements of his prime ministership. Young (2003) and Johnson (2013) have respectively theorised the ideas of "masculine protectionism" and "protective masculinity" to describe the increasing securitisation of political leadership in the post-9/11 era, in which male leaders drew on patriarchal stereotypes of protective "breadwinner" masculinity to mobilise the electorate's emotions (fear) and to wield against their political opponents. Protective masculinity is constituted through fear of a threat, real or imagined, with access to protection only gained in exchange for the positioning of the public in the subordinate role of "women and children." The adoption of masculine protectionism—either by the media or a leader—through war metaphors reinforces a patriarchal vision of crisis political leadership. Through a discursive analysis of newspaper texts, we identify how media actors compared Morrison to historic wartime prime ministers to provide an aspirational model for crisis leadership that contributes to an enduring vision of politics as a succession of "Great Men" (Williams, 2021b, p. 25).

Calls for Morrison to demonstrate his protective masculinity were most evident in a series of articles outlining the lessons to be learned from past wartime leaders. Writing for *The Australian Financial Review*, Nick Dyrenfurth (2020) billed John Curtin, who led Australia as prime minister during the Second World War, as "decisive," "courageous," and successful in "protecting the economy and shielding our most vulnerable citizens." In line with Johnson's (2013) concept of protective masculinity, Dyrenfurth (2020) highlighted these characteristics as an example to which Morrison could aspire while steering Australia through its own "war." Curtin, whose leadership was described as "resolute," remembered for his "fortitude," "stoicism," and "authority," was well-positioned as a model for Morrison, who "fittingly evoked" Curtin's legacy in his ANZAC Day speech (Edwards, 2020). Other articles were quick to compare Morrison's pandemic response to Curtin's wartime response: "In his address to the House of Representatives, the conservative leader reminded me of Labor stalwart John Curtin, who steered our country through the greater years of World War II" (Lang, 2020); and "Scott Morrison could become Australia's most important wartime leader" (Sheridan, 2020b). Through this metaphor, readers are directed to explicitly view the Covid-19 pandemic as a "war" and Morrison as an important "wartime leader" and patriarchal protector of the nation.

Comparisons to past wartime leaders did not stop at Curtin, with some columnists looking overseas for examples of Allied wartime leaders. This can largely be observed in the conservative broadsheet *The Australian*, which published numerous articles comparing Morrison's leadership to that of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill or US President Franklin

D. Roosevelt. One article (Kelly, 2020c), for example, noted Morrison's "Churchillian" moment—a reference to Churchill's famous wartime speech, subsequently considered by many to be an example of "great" crisis leadership—while another writer called on Morrison to heed history's warning, arguing that Churchill had been unable to harness political success after steering his country through war and "great national trauma" (Savva, 2020). Troy Bramston (2020) wrote glowingly of a "steady" and "purposeful" Roosevelt, arguing that his leadership held many "lessons" for Morrison, charged with leading the nation through the "twin calamities" of the pandemic and attendant "economic destruction." Though most Australians alive today did not live through the Second World War, it continues to exercise a lasting cultural impact, shaping national identity and resonating with the public consciousness (Chapman & Miller, 2020). Invoking previous wartime leaders in discussions of Morrison's pandemic response fosters an anachronistic connection "designed to evoke strong emotive and evaluative responses from the readers, e.g., trust in political leadership and nostalgia for 'heroic' historical moments in the collective cultural memory" (Musolff, 2022, pp. 315–316). Furthermore, these articles also present carefully considered portraits of past leaders, highlighting qualities consistent with masculine protectionism. By calling for a return to a certain type of leader to guide the country through the pandemic, this narrative perpetuates crisis leadership as a "male preserve" (Gidengil & Everitt, 1999).

Some media voices called on Morrison to mimic the economic strategy of past wartime leaders to "protect the economy and shield our most vulnerable" (Dyrenfurth, 2020). In effect, he was tasked with meeting the traditional conception of wartime leader and patriarchal figure: strong and protective of both health and the economy. Similarly, several articles used the wartime metaphor to applaud Morrison's stimulus packages, such as the \$130 billion JobKeeper scheme which allowed businesses to retain workers by paying \$1,500 a fortnight to workers who stood down from employment: "Morrison has led Australia well in a time of its gravest crisis since World War II. If he succeeds, he will join a pantheon which at the moment consists only of John Curtin, a leader who got us through" (Sheridan, 2020b); and "Morrison invoked the spirit of the ANZACs when introducing bills to cushion the economic blow of the deadly coronavirus pandemic on Monday" (Caisley, 2020). By measuring Morrison's economic policy response to the pandemic against the actions of former prime ministers, newspaper columnists recast him as a "powerful wartime leader" (Sheridan, 2020b) pulling the nation together.

The last example given above also draws on the ANZAC legend, a quintessential part of the Australian narrative and collective identity. According to this mythology, on which we will further elaborate in the following section, the ANZAC "diggers" are brave, loyal to their

mates, and willing to honourably sacrifice themselves for the good of the nation. Ultimately, it is an identity embodied by the (white) Australian male. Prime ministers have often evoked this myth in the past to signify Australian identity and values, yet its populist resurgence has largely been credited to former Liberal prime minister John Howard as part of his “nationalist political project” (McDonald & Merefield, 2010, p. 192). Likewise, when both Morrison and the media invoke the ANZAC myth, it is to encourage nationalism and loyalty from Australians and to emphasise Morrison’s protective role as leader. As demonstrated in previous research (Isaacs & Priesz, 2020, p. 2), this is something to be avoided in a pandemic “in favour of global cooperation.”

The use of “wartime leader” metaphors was largely limited to the conservative press. While these mastheads embraced such metaphors to heroize both the situation and the leader, the few examples from the centre-left press were less emphatic. For example, Tony Wright, associate editor and contributor to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, criticises the comparisons made between the pandemic and wars, and questions why political leaders would use such language for a health emergency. Wright argues that the two are completely diametrical:

War is the ultimate act of violence between humans, requiring governments to pay vast sums to equip defence forces with the means to kill opposing armies. In the current crisis, governments are paying vast sums to give their citizens the means to save themselves by retreating behind closed doors. It is an ultimate act of welfare. (Wright, 2020)

Likewise, the wartime leader metaphor was not identified in the few *The Guardian Australia* articles included in our sample. Rather, they instead used war metaphors to personify the virus or to refer to pandemic measures (Cox, 2020; Doherty, 2020).

It is also important to note that Morrison readily adopted war metaphors, using such rhetoric in his speeches and embracing the image of a wartime leader. Just before ANZAC Day in April 2020, Morrison stated that it was his “purpose” to fight the virus on behalf of “our principles, our way of doing things...once we have overcome these threats, we will rebuild and restore whatever the battle takes from us” (Morrison, as cited in Kelly, 2020b). This would later backfire as Morrison, like his conservative counterparts in the UK and US (Hanne, 2022), failed to live up to the image he created for himself by mismanaging the vaccine rollout and supporting a neoliberal “let it rip” ethos that urged “personal responsibility” over a collective response (Williams, in press).

Through the “wartime leader” metaphor, the press framed Morrison as an era-defining prime minister and patriarchal protector, shielding the population from an “invisible enemy” (Bailey, 2020) while also protecting their livelihoods. Moreover, filtering Morrison’s pandemic leadership response through a militarised lens works to reinforce politics as an exclusively masculine domain, thus situating men as the political norm

(Gidengil & Everitt, 1999, p. 51; Trimble, 2017, p. 152), and discursively excludes women from the realms of “great” crisis leadership.

5. Care as Combat: Discursively Masculinising Care

The press also framed the care sector through a militarised lens, generating what we here term the “masculinisation of care.” We note that these were not the only metaphors used in the media framing of workers. Domínguez and Sapiña (2022), for example, found that healthcare workers (almost always depicted as men) are portrayed as heroes, social benefactors, or arm-wrestling death. When they are drawn as women, far less frequently, they are portrayed in stereotypical nursing roles, drawn as angels, performing caregiving tasks, and even depicted in sexualised miniskirts. In our sample, we found that healthcare workers were also portrayed as heroes (often connected to war metaphors), lifesavers, or framed as commodities. However, conflict was the dominant narrative and war was the overarching metaphor.

There are numerous consequences of conceptually framing healthcare through war metaphors. First, it emotively depicts the relationship between humans and infectious disease as one of aggressive confrontation in which the virus is cast as an aggressor and patients or healthcare workers as defenders. This can demoralise the healthcare workforce, cause distress in patients, and even cause healthcare workers and patients alike to be blamed for not “fighting hard enough” if they fail to combat the disease, either in themselves or in those under their care (Castro Seixas, 2021, p. 1). Second, according to literary critic and cancer survivor Susan Sontag (1989, p. 182), “it powerfully contributes to the excommunicating and stigmatising of the ill.” Third, it can result in people becoming less empathetic, reduces social bonding, and increases aggression, self-defence and territorialism, fostering nationalist—rather than internationally cooperative—approaches to the pandemic, resulting in the monopolisation of essential equipment like personal protective equipment and vaccines (Guliashvili, 2022; Hanne, 2022). Lastly, it associates healthcare—a feminised industry—with stereotypically masculine traits of strength, aggression, and protection that are not only opposite to the traits that a healthcare worker should be expected to display (who wants an aggressive and violent nurse?) but also reinforce a hierarchy of protection without care. As war metaphors are traditionally used to invoke themes of violent masculine actions performed in a distant land, while women and children are kept safe at home (Young, 2003), militarising healthcare in this way erases the central role of women healthcare workers and undermines the overarching goals of the profession—to save lives and improve the health of the population.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the press often described the work of those in nursing, aged care, and disability care in military terms. The most ubiquitous example of this has been the use of the term

“frontline worker.” Although this metaphor is commonly used to describe difficult or dangerous work outside of military contexts, the word retains gendered connotations, especially when used with other traditionally masculine traits. Numerous articles in the conservative *The Australian* and *The Courier Mail* highlighted the “heroism” (Cheung, 2020; Salt, 2020), “sacrifices” (Cheung, 2020) and “courage” (Penberthy, 2020) of these workers. An editorial in *The Courier Mail*, for example, lavished praise on healthcare workers with the headline “Hail our Frontline Heroes” (Jones, 2020a), casting them as “heroes in the battle against coronavirus” and the “primary defence and attack.” The author not only “salute[d]” these workers, but also used the opportunity to launch an ongoing series of “Frontline Heroes” special features. Though these examples encouraged community support for healthcare workers, the use of the term “frontline” recasts a feminised industry as effectively masculine, leaving women healthcare workers out of the picture. While one could perceive this term as opposing traditional gender hierarchies by subverting the idea of the military as an exclusively male domain, terms like “frontline” are still culturally entrenched as masculine due to their heavy associations with trench warfare in the First and Second World Wars (Musolff, 2022, p. 312). Perhaps, with further iterations linking the frontline with the care industry, this might eventually change. For now, however, by rhetorically transforming care into combat the media links heroism with masculinity, thereby implying that work is only considered important when it is associated with men.

Some commentators went to greater lengths to extend the war metaphor. Instead of using the term “frontline” as a shorthand to describe the work of those administering the important health response, several articles paired “frontline” with other war and military tropes. Aged-care workers, for example, were described as a “faceless army” “shouldering the burden” (Carruthers, 2020) and “admired heroes” who could “get us through” the “darkest days” of our generational equivalent of a war, on the “frontlines of aged care and healthcare where the battle is being won” (Cater, 2020). In *The Courier Mail*, under the headline “The ‘Bad Ass’ Heroes Waging War on Killer” (2020), scientist Stacey Cheung depicts a week in the life of a medical researcher developing a Covid-19 vaccine, “salut[ing]” all “frontline healthcare workers” who are “going to war with an invisible enemy” and are “the real heroes.” Another *The Courier Mail* piece (Lang, 2020) highlights a need for the country to come together in support of “frontline workers” who are “risking their lives to save ours” arguing that this “war” will not be “won by individuals” but by “Team Australia.” These examples highlight the rhetorical power of metaphors, which can serve to “hide relations of power and dominance,” such as patriarchal gender norms (Falk, 2013). At a time when Australia’s aged care system faced investigation by a royal commission, funding arrangements in the National Disability Insurance

Scheme were being slashed and nurses were in many instances not provided with adequate personal protective equipment or hazard pay, the use of gendered war metaphors superficially framed those in the care workforce as respected and admired while ignoring the systemic problems undermining their industries.

The ANZAC legend also appeared in articles using the “frontline” metaphor to reframe feminised care work as military capability. On ANZAC Day, an editorial in *The Courier Mail* titled “Legendary ANZAC Spirit Is What Will Get Us Through Crisis” (Jones, 2020b) established values associated with the “ANZAC spirit”—“endurance, courage, mateship and sacrifice”—before arguing how these would be essential for a successful Covid-19 response, positioning “frontline” “everyday heroes” in healthcare alongside defence personnel. As discussed above, these values are tied to white masculine stereotypes that play a specific role in Australian military culture and have shaped our perceived national identity. The editorial encouraged the public to hold those healthcare workers “leading from the front” in their thoughts with past and present servicemen and women, arguing that “we will win this current health war with the same endurance, courage, mateship and sacrifice that our brave veterans relied upon” (Jones, 2020b). The significance of using healthcare workers as proxies for soldiers, while writing specifically about the ANZAC spirit, reinforces a myth that both privileges masculinist perspectives of war and reinforces dominant Australian notions of nationhood, whiteness, mateship, and digger masculinity. This contrasts with the reality of a female-dominated healthcare workforce in which the majority, especially doctors, are born overseas—many from South and South-East Asia (OECD, 2020). While various feminist movements have attempted to challenge and disrupt these myths (Davies, 1996), mythologising the “ANZAC spirit” still dominates Australian culture. The use of the “frontline” worker metaphor alongside ANZAC Day celebrations cherishes traditionally masculine traits, thereby reinforcing both nationalism and gender-based power imbalances.

Militarising the care industry is ultimately damaging to both healthcare workers and patients. By implying that healthcare workers are akin to warriors, that our bodies are battlegrounds, and that medicine is a weapon, this rhetoric alters the care profession. Healthcare is ultimately committed to both beneficence and non-maleficence (Gillon, 1994) whereas war is the antithesis, characterised by violence, destruction, and mortality. As Bates (2020, p. 8) argues, healthcare workers “seek to do no harm and to heal the sick,” and transforming them into soldiers “violates this orientation materially and symbolically.” As hospitals thereby become warzones, it also normalises the idea that it is inevitable that workers will be caught in the crossfire (infected with Covid-19), that civilians will die, and that sacrifices must be made for the survival of the herd (Benzi & Novarese, 2022, p. 7). On 25 April 2020, ANZAC Day, *The Courier Mail* editorial

acknowledged the unsafe working conditions on these “frontlines,” writing that “despite reported deficits in masks and other protective equipment, our success is a function of the efforts and sacrifices of [healthcare workers]. As a nation we owe them a lot” (Jones, 2020b). Instead of making the case for providing workers with safer conditions or hazard pay, *The Courier Mail* encouraged Australians to “spare a thought or a prayer” for the “heroes...on the frontline of the coronavirus war.” As Isaacs and Priesz (2020, p. 2) ask, “in a war, heroes get medals but deserters are shot, so are those vulnerable healthcare workers who feel unable to work on the frontline and request redeployment also ‘deserters’?”

6. Conclusion

The use of war metaphors in press coverage of the pandemic is not innocuous. As we have demonstrated, the media’s discursive framing can impact ideas of crisis leadership and the pandemic response as well as re-uphold gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations that privilege (white) men and masculinity. Once Covid-19 arrived in Australia, the press promptly drew on war metaphors to describe the pandemic, often personifying the virus as a tangible “enemy” that we must “defeat.” This extended to metaphors used in relation to the prime minister, framed as a powerful “wartime” leader who could learn lessons from the “great” Allied leaders of the Second World War. Yet such portrayal endorses qualities of a patriarchal protective masculinity, reinforcing crisis leadership as a male domain, and situating men as the political norm. Likewise, we have identified how the care economy—particularly healthcare—is masculinised by war metaphors. By discursively recasting a traditionally woman-dominated industry through the wartime concepts of heroism, courage, and sacrifice, the press not only excluded women healthcare workers but cognitively tied ideas of heroism with masculinity, implying work is only important when associated with men while ignoring systemic problems and unsafe working conditions for healthcare workers in the pandemic era. By deploying gender metaphors—like war—that draw on male experiences to describe and define pandemic reality, the press ultimately reify patriarchal ideas of politics and nationhood that privilege men and disadvantage all others.

Through this analysis, we have made several contributions that advance knowledge of the gendered mediation of the Covid-19 pandemic, offering valuable insights for international scholarship. First, we add to the burgeoning literature on war metaphors by providing a gendered analysis of their use in the pandemic, which has been largely overlooked. We argue that war metaphors are fundamentally patriarchal and find that such masculine narratives present a specific vision of the world that reinforces hegemonic gender norms in both politics and healthcare, as well as gender disparities more broadly. Second, by solely focusing on a male leader,

rather than as a counterpart for comparison, we demonstrate how the media perpetuate traditional masculinist views of politics through patriarchal metaphors that serve to further legitimise certain kinds of men, and therefore expand the gendered mediation thesis. Third, in our purposive sample, we found that the majority of articles utilising war metaphors in coverage of the pandemic were published by the conservative press, particularly *The Australian*. This reflects both the association between militarism and conservatism (Jost et al., 2007; Lakoff, 2004), as well as News Corp’s history of support for war, such as the Iraq invasion and subsequent occupation (McKnight, 2010, p. 307). War metaphors were rarely mentioned in the progressive online newspaper *The Guardian Australia* while the centre-left *The Sydney Morning Herald* largely refrained from wartime leader metaphors, though occasionally drew on metaphors militarising care. It also appears that the location of the masthead (regional/national) makes little difference. Lastly, while many studies examining political leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic have focused on leaders from North America and Europe, Australia has been generally overlooked unless briefly mentioned as a “successful” example (though Power & Crosthwaite, 2022, have recently published a lexical analysis of Morrison and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s crisis communication, observing how Morrison was critiqued for his “paternalistic messaging”). It is important to analyse countries that effectively managed the pandemic—at least initially—and, by providing an Australian case study, we have demonstrated that war metaphors were common in the early pandemic period despite how well governments responded to the virus.

The Covid-19 crisis calls for responses that are collaborative rather than confrontational. War metaphors encourage nationalism while disguising social inequalities and serve to reinforce masculine norms and power relations, all of which are fundamentally detrimental to pandemic responses. It is therefore important that we replace war metaphors with conceptual analogies that convey a vision of a more kind, compassionate, care-driven, and socially equal future.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the reviewers and editor for taking the time and effort necessary to review the manuscript which ultimately strengthened the final publication.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

The Frontlines and Margins: Gendered Care and Covid-19 in the Indian Media

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Submitted: 5 August 2022 | Accepted: 25 January 2023 | Published: 28 February 2023

Abstract

Among the many stories that emerged out of India during the pandemic, one was somewhat buried under the media discourse around the migrant crisis, lockdown regulations, and economic fallout. This was the story of striking accredited social health activist workers asking for fair wages, improved benefits, and better working conditions. The Covid-19 crisis highlighted the poor health infrastructure and the precarious, and often, stigmatized nature of frontline work, managed at the community level by paramedical workers, a significant proportion of whom are women. There has been considerable attention paid by feminist groups as well as health-related civil society organizations on the gender-based inequities that have emerged during the pandemic, particularly in relation to care work. This study explores how care work performed by the accredited social health activists was framed in the mainstream media, through an examination of articles in three selected English daily newspapers over one year of the pandemic. Drawing on theoretical work deriving from similar health crises in other regions of the world, we explore how the public health infrastructure depends on the invisible care-giving labor of women in official and unofficial capacities to respond to the situation. The systemic reliance on women's unpaid or ill-paid labor at the grassroots level is belied by the fact that women's concerns and contributions are rarely visible in issues of policy and public administration. Our study found that this invisibility extended to media coverage as well. Our analysis offers a "political economy of caregiving" that reiterates the need for women's work to be recognized at all levels of functioning.

Keywords

care work; Covid-19; frontline workers; India; media framing; social health activists; women healthcare workers

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps" edited by Margreth Lünenborg (Freie Universität Berlin), Miriam Siemon (Freie Universität Berlin), and Wolfgang Reißmann (Freie Universität Berlin).

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1. Introduction

Among the dominant images that stood out during the Covid-19 pandemic in India were those of frontline health workers—doctors, nurses, and community health volunteers—in situations that were seen as risky, demanding courage and commitment. There was, understandably, a heightened critical focus on the systems, policies, and people running the healthcare sector, with news and commentary around inequitable service provi-

sion and infrastructural gaps, the disproportionate burden on certain sections of the population as well as on those at the lower levels of service provision. At the same time, there was a hope that this crisis, having revealed the deep-seated problems in the system, might generate the will and imagination to revamp it. Writing in the *Financial Times* in April 2020, author Arundhati Roy described the pandemic as "a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (Roy, 2020), a possible turning point in our imagination of public health care.

Media reports from across the world and subsequent research from multiple disciplinary perspectives have underscored the differential impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on populations and communities. Hardest hit were the poor, the weak, the elderly, those with no social security, and those with already marginalized identities. Among the intersecting factors that exacerbated disadvantage in the face of the disease and its many sequelae—including lockdowns, job losses, economic hardships, social dynamics—were race (Cohen & van der Muelen Rodgers, 2021; J. Smith et al., 2021), ethnicity (Bambra et al., 2020), and gender (Kabeer et al., 2021; J. Smith et al., 2021). However, while research from a variety of disciplinary perspectives emphasized the systemic nature of many of these disadvantages, the tendency to treat the pandemic as exceptional in its impact was widespread both in political and media rhetoric/discourse (Khan, 2021; Khan & Singh, 2021; J. Smith et al., 2021).

However, scholars across disciplines who have examined the social impact of public health crises (Bambra et al., 2021; Harmon, 2016; Nunes, 2020) suggest that we have been here before; other health emergencies have offered us similar lessons, which were not only quickly forgotten, but also displayed a commitment to quickly returning to business as before, business as usual. The mainstream media, which, in the idealized social responsibility model of journalism, is expected to bear witness and draw attention to the dynamics of power and capital, tends to focus on the spectacular, somewhat ahistorical presentation of inequity in health. Coverage then falls into patterns dictated by the expediencies of the current news cycle and its associated culture, focusing on values like immediacy, conflict, prominence, magnitude, and dealing with surface level rather than deeper dynamics. This leads to an abundance of coverage of the devastating impacts of the crisis—in this case the Covid-19 pandemic—on marginalized groups, but by and large, at a level that renders them as momentary and exceptional rather than persistent and systemic. These include the differential impacts of this pandemic on people of color, women, disadvantaged castes (in India) and ethnicities, and geographic location. Additionally, any systemic focus tends to be momentary, disappearing from media attention once the crisis has passed, or a new crisis emerges (Shih et al., 2008). This has been seen in framing analyses of news related to previous health emergencies (Pan & Meng, 2016).

In this article, we examine the mainstream English-language media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic in India, focusing on one subsection of the population—women health workers in direct care roles—to understand the ways in which gendered work and direct care occupations were represented, and how the impact of the health crisis on this group was framed and discussed. Specifically, we look at women community health volunteers, who work directly with families and serve as the link between community members and the primary health care system.

Contextualizing our work against the backdrop of lockdown measures and public health responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in India, we draw on recent literature in gender studies, development, public health, and media studies to position our analysis of media discourse relating to a group of workers who bore a significant brunt of the care work during the pandemic—frontline health workers known as accredited social health activists (ASHAs). This cadre of health workers, established in 2005, is almost entirely made up of women drawn from the communities they are intended to serve. In May 2022, the World Health Organization (2022) recognized the ASHA workers' contribution to care during the pandemic, conferring on them the Global Health Leaders Award. Following a feminist political economy (FPE) framework (Cohen & van der Muelen Rodgers, 2021; Lokot & Bhatia, 2020; J. Smith et al., 2021), we argue that care work, whether paid or unpaid, is positioned through media discourse as a natural and routine part of women's work, thus reinforcing a normalized construction of such work as gendered and simultaneously of high social yet low economic worth. Such a framing, we argue, precludes the kind of systemic overhaul that would be necessary to place economic value on care work. In the case of ASHA workers, despite their ostensible formal health worker status, we posit that this discourse reinforces the gendered expectations of selfless care and further invisibilizes their systematic marginalization in the health system and in society.

2. Covid-19, Care Work, and Gender

When the world shut down in early 2020 following the World Health Organization's declaration of a global health emergency (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020), India was one of the first countries to implement a strict countrywide lockdown, starting from March 24, 2020, and remaining in force till May 1, 2020. Even as government bodies focused on containment and surveillance, the media began to report on parallel issues that arose from the lockdown, such as the knock-on effect it had on daily wage workers and the large numbers of the population that worked in the unorganized sector—domestic maids, cleaners, street vendors, drivers, etc.—who stood to lose their monthly earnings since they were not protected by labor laws (Agarwal, 2021; Assan & Chambers, 2014). This immediate concern grew into a larger crisis as thousands of migrant workers living and working far from their native villages were left to fend for themselves. This unforeseen situation resulted in a humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions, and the government was ill-equipped to manage it. It took civil society—individuals, NGOs, and hurriedly organized humanitarian groups—to step in and arrange food and supplies for the thousands making their way back to their rural homes—often on foot (Barhate et al., 2021; Samaddar, 2020). The widespread distress caused by these measures has been widely documented

and commented upon (Gothoskar, 2021; Rajan, 2020; Samaddar, 2020; Suresh et al., 2020).

Amidst this, the health system, both private and public, was propelled into emergency mode, with ASHA workers at the vanguard playing a role in public education, ensuring compliance with preventive health measures, monitoring infection and illness status, and later in the pandemic, motivating people to get vaccinated. Roughly one million women employed by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare work as ASHAs mainly in rural primary care but are also associated with peri-urban and urban primary health centers. The Hindi word “*Asha*” translates to “hope,” and these women are crucial to helping achieve maternal and child health goals (hospital deliveries, immunizations). Other key functions they perform involve: (a) keeping a stock of essential health-related items such as basic drugs for common illnesses (including fever, diarrhea, malaria, and tuberculosis), oral rehydration salts, folic acid tablets, disposable delivery kits, and condoms, and (b) being communication conduits for government health schemes and public health-related information. As in many other countries that employ community health workers (Brownstein et al., 2011; Pérez & Martínez, 2008; Schneider et al., 2016), these women act as critical frontline workers in providing health care options to underserved populations. The position is, however, considered a voluntary one, with each ASHA volunteer given a nominal stipend along with an outcome-based incentive structure, as described by the National Health Mission on their website (Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, 2023).

Starting in March 2020, these workers acted as the first defense against the community spread of the virus, often without adequate safety resources for themselves. Conditions of work for this group had always been the focus of activist attention (Ved et al., 2019), but the pandemic revealed just how dire the problem was. Soon enough, the resentment on the ground in the face of continued state neglect and social apathy led to protests and strikes by ASHA workers in many locations (Srivastava, 2021; Sarkar, 2021). The striking ASHA workers became a flashpoint during the first wave of the pandemic in India, with a few media reports drawing on health activists’ inputs to highlight the vulnerabilities of the public health infrastructure and bringing into sharp focus the magnitude of reliance on the under-paid labor of women (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2020). The ASHA worker represents an important intersectional figure; she is responsible for community health on multiple fronts, her value derives from her ability to “care” for members of the community in fine-grained ways, yet she is seen by the system as a “volunteer” whose services derive from normative expectations of women’s unpaid labor, both productive and reproductive. Given the low financial rewards and relatively low educational requirements, these women tend to be drawn from relatively disadvantaged sections of society; in the Indian context, this may also reflect marginality on the basis

of caste. To position the necessary affective labor performed by the ASHAs as “voluntary” also perpetuates the continuing subordination of women within an otherwise professionalized sector (Das & Das, 2021). The efforts of ASHA workers to confront this through collectivization and articulation of demands to formalize their status intensified during the pandemic—In fact, as our analysis will show, this was one story that rendered the group visible in media discourse.

3. A Feminist Political Economy of Health

We position our study within the large and growing literature on health disparities within healthcare (Venkatapuram, 2013), but focus on caregivers rather than on the provision of care. Public health crises, such as HIV/AIDS, swine flu, ebola, zika, and the most recent, the Covid-19 pandemic, have regularly shown how health inequalities emerge along the fault lines of race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, class and caste. Additionally, research has long shown that not only are women more vulnerable to health issues than men due to social, economic, and political imperatives, but also that they bear the brunt of the care work that is required for global healthcare (Kabeer et al., 2021). Most health infrastructure across the world relies on women’s unpaid and low-paid work as caregivers both at home and outside, yet this work is “conspicuously invisible” (Harmon, 2016, p. 525) in health policy and administrative measures, as well as in media discourse. Harmon (2016) points to the “paradox” of global health governance where, on the one hand, women are visible in high-profile health-related positions whereas the actual care work performed by millions of women goes unrecognized and unacknowledged. During the pandemic in India, for instance, the few visible women included Dr Sowmya Swaminathan, principal scientist at the World Health Organization, and Dr Gagandeep Kang, a senior virologist, who were seen as spokespersons for the global health establishment and the scientific community, respectively, or Kerala’s Health Minister K. K. Sailaja, whose approach to health governance received positive attention. However, the experiences of everyday caregiving were rarely visible. Despite the increasing presence of women in key health governance and scientific/academic positions, gender is often not taken into account in global health strategy, policy, or practice. Harmon (2016) attributes this to patriarchal bias and gender blindness, a general tendency to ignore social and economic structures that favor men and disadvantage women. Feminist research shows that caregiving and social reproduction fall predominantly to women, tasks that are not accorded social or financial value, and thus the contribution of women is either assumed or ignored in developing public policy. Echoing this, global health policy ignores and simultaneously reinscribes gendered stereotypes of care (Das & Das, 2021; George, 2008).

The political economy of health recognizes that health is more than a genetic attribute, rather, it is a

construct determined by socio-political factors (Nunes, 2020; Venkatapuram, 2013), and emerges from the conditions in which people live. In order to understand how health and disease are constructed, framed, and represented within societies, we need to look at everyday practices and how they are situated within larger social, political, and economic contexts (Harding, 1991; D. E. Smith, 1987). Affective labor is folded into many of the roles that are conventionally performed by women, an expectation that is neither articulated contractually nor compensated financially. While unpaid care work within domestic settings is only now being recognized within policy spaces, the unpaid component of other feminized occupations is yet to be accounted for in any formal or economic sense (Nunes, 2020). A further complication arises in emerging economies, where non-domestic care work such as that performed by ASHAs is often seen as “duty” in service of social development.

For our analysis we draw on two specific theoretical approaches—the everyday political economy of health (EPEH) and FPE, the first articulated by Nunes (2020) and the second by Harmon (2016). These approaches allow us a way to investigate how power and economic imperatives work in everyday life to promote gender inequalities in the context of health. EPEH rejects a top-down approach that views inequalities in health as simply a function of insensitive or coercive policy, law, or administrative barriers imposed by local, state, or international authorities. Rather, it sees capitalism and neoliberal power as multifaceted and multi-layered, occurring at many levels and manifesting in different ways, that unobtrusively accrues economic benefit to those with the power. FPE casts a gender-focused lens on women’s care work and unacknowledged labor set against a context of structural discrimination that includes intersectionalities of race, class, and caste, among others. Even as FPE’s focus has been on how gender-based discrimination influences the social conditions and health of women (Syed, 2021), it also forces questions about the dynamics of the health system on the supply, and the ways in which service provision is gendered, in terms of labor and governance. Syed (2021) notes that jobs in health that involve care work, when performed by women, are often categorized as unskilled, and therefore paid less than similar jobs performed by men.

Cross-country analyses have shown that globally, unpaid care work is done mostly by women, and that they spend nearly three times more time than men in doing this work (International Labour Organization, 2018). Further, recent estimates show that 80% of the world’s domestic workers are women, and 70% of the work in global healthcare and social care is also done by women (Lokot & Bhatia, 2020). Following Lokot and Bhatia (2020), we, too, define women’s care work as encompassing: (a) the unpaid care work and social reproduction done by women at home and in their communities; (b) underpaid care work done by women in their roles as domestic workers, cooks, *ayahs*, and nursing

assistants; and finally, (c) paid care work in healthcare and related spheres. In this article, we restrict our discussion to the type of care work done by ASHAs, which in essence, encompasses all three forms of care work when one looks at their formal and informal roles as women in health services performing care at the community level, going door to door to monitor health and illness.

4. Gender and Covid-19 in the Media

Given the critical scholarship in the field, it is reasonable to expect that media coverage during Covid-19 would reflect a sensitivity to gender issues within health care service provision and specifically the double burden placed on women frontline workers. Media coverage not only brings visibility to structural inequalities, but it also frames the terms on which public conversations take place. The civic response to the migrant crisis in the wake of the national lockdown in India was largely driven by coverage in both mainstream and alternative media, spurring the formation of civic networks of support for people in need (Barhate et al., 2021). Such a response echoes what has been seen in previous emergency situations arising from both natural and human-made disasters (Barnes et al., 2008; Iyengar & Simon, 1993). Deeper structural problems are more challenging to call out persistently, as this would require going beyond the episodic coverage that media tend to focus on. Yet there have been some gains made through consistent media re-framing of issues related to gender, health, and violence (Durham, 2015; Yagnik, 2014). Covid-19 provided an opportunity for journalists to write stories that could possibly begin to shift social attitudes towards care work and its value, making visible the unequal share of the care burden on women at the lower end of the health service system. Based on an analysis of representation of female essential workers (termed “keyworkers”) in UK women’s magazines, Orgad and Rottenberg (2022) note that the huge visibility of these workers in the media and their overwhelmingly positive portrayal offered an opportunity to discuss “care justice” through a critique of gender inequitable systems, but also to reinforce “care gratitude” through a celebration of such workers’ heroism.

A content analysis of Covid-19-related stories mentioning female nurses across three countries (the US, China, and India) found that while they were visible as sources, the presentation of their experiences varied across contexts (DeWees & Miller, 2020). Indian media tended to position this caregiving as fulfilling a personal responsibility even as the voices of nurses expressed “frustration with stigmatization” and related violence (DeWees & Miller, 2020, p 228). The authors pointed to the need to relate these experiences to structural issues, as inputs to policy reform.

The NWMJ carried out a nationwide collaborative study of articles related to Covid-19 in 12 national newspapers, in seven languages, between March and

September 2020, which showed that women and marginalized genders were central to the story in less than 5% of the sample (Khan & Singh, 2021). The NWMI report further found that:

Women and trans people were rarely present as protagonists, sources and experts, sometimes even in stories that were directly about them. News stories on the whole tended to quote men. There were almost no news stories about Dalit and Adivasi women and the trans community in the newspaper articles studied. (Khan, 2021)

Another media analysis looked at the framing of “female organizing” during the pandemic to argue that the gaze employed by the media at the national and international levels tended to privilege existing hegemonies of caste and gender while local media “confronted” this gaze (Banerjee et al., 2022).

This article builds on and goes beyond these studies to look at the media discourse as seen across three large Indian mainstream newspapers while applying the two frameworks mentioned above: FPE and the EPEH. The attempt in this analysis is to understand whether and to what extent the media discourse went beyond episodic and neoliberal framings of care work in their coverage of ASHA workers during the pandemic. The assumptions we make, drawing from the perspective of critical FPE and the EPEH, are that journalistic coverage should, while covering ASHA workers, acknowledge and make visible in both explicit and implicit ways, the following:

- The structural conditions of work, including the dynamics of gender, and where appropriate, caste;
- The systemic inequalities within health care service delivery;
- The value and contribution of care work, including affective labor, performed by the ASHAs in alleviating the health burden.

As the studies mentioned here have shown, these are assumptions—rather, expectations—that have rarely been the basis of coverage. However, we embarked on the analysis to understand whether and to what extent the potential for disrupting “coverage as usual” had been utilized by the news media.

5. Methodology

The sample for this study consisted of articles drawn from three different national English-language newspapers—*The Hindu*, *The Times of India*, and *The Indian Express* over one year—from March 24, 2020 (the day the Indian government implemented a nationwide lockdown) to March 24, 2021 (both dates inclusive). The newspapers were selected for their long-standing reputation as national newspapers of record and for

their wide readership. While *The Times of India* is more popular in Northern India, *The Hindu* is more widely read in Southern India, and the *Indian Express* has a pan-Indian readership. A keyword search was used to draw relevant articles from the online archives of the three newspapers. Search terms included: women, gender, Covid-19, healthcare workers, ASHA workers, and front-line workers. Articles that included at least one term related to gender, healthcare, and the pandemic, along with either “ASHA” or “frontline worker” in the headline, were selected.

The search yielded a total of 244 articles of all types (news reports, features, editorials, and op-eds) containing these key terms across the three newspapers in this time period (*The Hindu*: 89, *The Times of India*: 56, and *The Indian Express*: 99). These were scanned (headlines, lead paragraphs, visuals) for relevance so as to eliminate articles that did not substantively relate to ASHAs and care work or to female frontline workers. This resulted in a pool of 79 articles (*The Hindu*: 25, *The Times of India*: 10, and *The Indian Express*: 44) across types that were included in the analysis. A majority of the 79 articles included in the analysis were short news reports of under 300 words, with a few longer essays and medium-length features. Among the 79 selected articles were 19 opinion pieces (*The Indian Express*: eight, *The Hindu*: 11), most of these written by health professionals, academics, and policy analysts.

Textual analysis (in Stuart Hall’s tradition of studying representation, further elaborated on in Fürsich, 2009) was performed on this second set of articles to arrive at key narrative strands through a close reading of the headline and copy, with attention to the type of sources used, framing of the work performed by the ASHAs, and any systemic issues mentioned, either as an observation by the reporter or by a source. Textual analysis through the close reading method allowed us to understand representation through the use of linguistic and syntactic cues that positioned the subject of interest in relation to social-political and cultural structures. Through this close reading, initially of headlines and lead paragraphs, and subsequently of the entire text of the selected articles, we identified a set of key questions to ask ourselves while reading the articles:

- What subjective positions do women health care workers occupy in media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic in India? To what extent is their care work acknowledged and how is it framed?
- How are women healthcare workers—across levels—represented in the selected news outlets?
- (How) does gender emerge as a concern in media reports of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown in India?
- While academic and activist inquiries have pointed to the gendered nature of the pandemic’s impact on India’s population, to what extent do these concerns find a place in reportage and commentary?

While the first two questions were specific and were answered by a close reading of the articles, extracting quotes and identifying narrative threads, the third and fourth questions were addressed based on an overall analysis of the entire corpus of articles. The combined frameworks of FPE and the EPEH allowed us to discern whether and how women's care work was recognized and valued within the stories and how women care workers (ASHAs) were positioned as members of the health value chain.

6. Findings: Victims, Heroes, Carers as Usual

The first stage in our sampling process allowed us to gain a sense of the general direction and tone of coverage and established the fact that gender as a theme was not prominent in news stories of the pandemic except as part of the commentary on the gendered nature of job losses, or a few reports around the increase in the incidence of domestic violence and under-age marriages of girl children. To offer a sense of how rarely gender featured in the editorial pages of just one of the three newspapers, *The Hindu*, we did a quick sampling of editorials and found that of close to 450 opinion pieces that included the key term "Covid-19 impact" only 25 addressed gender explicitly and none of these focused on care work. Of *The Times of India* articles that showed up in the initial search, most were brief pieces reporting studies conducted by civil society organizations and offered with no further commentary or analysis. A scan of the bylines across the corpus of stories revealed that the few opinion pieces that directly addressed gender issues were mostly written by women.

Building on the findings of the NWMI study mentioned above (Khan, 2021), we also found that there was a general invisibility of care work or gender-related concerns in the sample of articles analyzed. Curiously enough, in the photographs carried alongside articles, women were hyper visible as domestic workers, street vendors, migrant workers, and health care staff. ASHA workers were particularly visible in photographs, their pink *saris* becoming almost emblematic of frontline care. Yet, in the accompanying text, gender as a construct was largely invisible as a concern or as a social determinant.

Our close reading, informed by the two theoretical approaches mentioned earlier (FPE and EPEH) led to the discerning of two main narrative threads that ran across the media content, relating to the gendered impact of the pandemic and more specifically, to women in care work. As Berger (1997) notes, media narratives emerge over time through the repetitive positioning of subjects in specific ways that then become dominant stories about those subjects. The two main narratives around gender in relation to Covid-19 are outlined in Table 1 along with a selection of illustrative quotes from the analyzed articles.

6.1. Narrative One: Women as Victims

This narrative was a strong thread through the year and across newspapers. While the majority of articles in the beginning of the time frame focused on the risks posed to health care workers, especially the women who were in the ASHA program, as the pandemic continued into the year, there were scattered articles about the dangers posed by the Covid-19 virus to pregnant and lactating women, as well as other crime-related stories where women were assaulted due to ill health or other pandemic-induced vulnerabilities. Three main categories of victimhood were seen: (a) physical/health-related vulnerabilities, which rendered women more susceptible to adverse health impacts; (b) crime-related, where women were harassed or assaulted by strangers, or subject to domestic abuse by spouses, parents, or siblings; and (c) economic distress due to job losses. A fourth, less frequently seen category, related to women as victims of a patriarchal order.

Physical and health-related victimhood involved both warnings based on emerging scientific data about how women were affected, as well as stories of health care workers and relatives falling ill and/or succumbing to Covid-19. There were also stories about ill-treatment of health care workers due to fears of being infected by them. With regard to crime and violence, there were stories of assault by patients, ambulance drivers, or family members putting women at greater risk than usual. News reports cited studies that noted a dramatic rise in distress calls to helplines for domestic violence and intimate partner violence. Lastly, economic distress was also a topic of discussion with regard to loss of livelihoods for women, a large proportion of whom work in the unorganized/informal sector in gendered jobs such as sanitation and personal care.

Interestingly, even as women were seen as being disproportionately affected by circumstances arising from the pandemic, there was little or no reflection on why this might be so, or mention of systemic factors that contributed to this impact—factors that have been raised by critical scholars across disciplines. Articles in *The Hindu* were to some extent exceptions to this pattern, with reports including opinions of experts who pointed to lacunae in the health system. While there were a fair number of articles describing the impact on women across these dimensions in the early phase of the pandemic (between the months of March and August), the coverage trailed off in later months, suggesting that even this little focus on gender was not sustained over time.

6.2. Narrative Two: Women as Selfless Heroes

A second narrative that we identified portrayed the women as "warriors" and "heroes." While many articles with this narrative theme were about the ASHA workers, the theme ran through other women-centered articles as well. Stories described the countless hours

Table 1. Main narrative threads and illustrative extracts from articles analyzed.

Narrative	Theme	Illustrative text: Headline	Illustrative text: Quote from article
Women as victims of the pandemic	Health-related vulnerability	Safeguarding the vulnerable among us (<i>The Hindu</i> , March 27, 2020)	"We need special measures to protect the millions of health and care workers..."
		Does the coronavirus affect men and women differently? Here's what a doctor says (<i>Indian Express</i> , September 10, 2020)	"The data from India also shows that there is almost 65:35 percent male:female death rate disparity ratio..."
	Economic vulnerability	Fallen through the cracks (<i>The Hindu</i> , November 17, 2020)	"Recent labour codes disregard women's work conditions."
		We're not all in the same boat (<i>The Hindu</i> , January 27, 2021)	"Globally, women are over-represented in the sectors hardest hit by job losses."
	Social and domestic violence	The invisible face of the fallout (<i>The Hindu</i> , April 21, 2020)	"Even in these disruptive times, women's safety should become a priority."
		Gender-based violence was predictable, and preventable, fallout of lockdown (<i>Indian Express</i> , November 25, 2020)	"Till date, public discussion of the pandemic's impact on gender violence is confined to domestic violence, but violence cannot be categorized in airtight boxes... Violence is the short-hand language we use to communicate power play..."
	Systemic issues	Health worker safety deserves a second look (<i>The Hindu</i> , September 25, 2020)	"Many health workers are overworked not by choice, but rather the lack of it"
		Ironing out wrinkles in India's pandemic response (<i>The Hindu</i> , March 25, 2020)	"Health workers also face physical and mental exhaustion, which affects their morale, in addition to infection risk."
		The criticality of community engagement (<i>The Hindu</i> , April 6, 2020)	"We...need to remember the trust deficit in the system, between ASHA workers and the public."
		Unheard and unprotected (<i>The Hindu</i> , June 28, 2020)	"The pandemic has...exposed the predominant social inequalities among the working classes....ASHAs lack masks and personal protective equipment...putting their lives in danger on exiguous incomes."
Covid-19 will push 47 million more women, girls, into extreme poverty by 2021: UN (<i>Indian Express</i> , September 3, 2020)		"The increases in women's extreme poverty are a stark indictment of deep flaws in the ways we have constructed our societies and economies." (Quoting a UN official)	
Explained: The worldwide gender skew in coronavirus thinktanks (<i>Indian Express</i> , October 5, 2020)		"Lack of representation is one symptom of a broken system where governance is not inclusive of gender, geography, sexual orientation, race...ultimately excluding those who offer unique perspectives."	
	A health plan for Bihar (<i>Indian Express</i> , November 24, 2020)	"Covid-19 has laid bare the state's weak public health system, systemic flaws, structural deficiencies and gaps in implementing welfare schemes."	

Table 1. (Cont.) Main narrative threads and illustrative extracts from articles analyzed.

Narrative	Theme	Illustrative text: Headline	Illustrative text: Quote from article
Women as heroes of Covid-19 times	Care work as socially valuable	About 600,000 virus-hunting women health activists go on strike (<i>The Times of India</i> , August 7, 2020)	"Losing the ASHAs would not only threaten India's containment effort, but also impact the other essential health services they provide."
		The many lessons from Covid-19 (<i>The Hindu</i> , October 27, 2020)	"Empowering our frontline health workers will yield rich dividends."
		ASHA workers: Pillars of health care (<i>The Times of India</i> , July 7, 2020)	"Covid warriors who are pleased to be serving the government in this time of need."
	Care work as exemplifying women's natural sacrifice	"I wanted to step out, help people": Meet Veeralakshmi, first woman ambulance pilot in Tamil Nadu (<i>Indian Express</i> , September 3, 2020)	"I had no fear, I was interested in taking up this job....I wanted to step out and help the people in this difficult period." (Quote from Veeralakshmi)
ASHA workers on Covid-19 duty in DK continue to be under constant threat (<i>The Times of India</i> , April 15, 2020)		"We must respect their sacrifices and not obstruct them from discharging their duties."	

put in by female nurses and doctors, a story about the first woman ambulance driver risking her life to carry Covid-19-positive patients to the hospital, a diligent administrative officer who worked right until her delivery and came back to work soon after. The articles all lauded these women for their "bravery," framing them as "pleased to serve the country in this hour of need." The use of such militaristic metaphors to describe the work of care positions it even more starkly as a duty that deserves gratitude but not compensation. Where health care workers were being harassed and vilified due to fear of the virus, the articles called for society/citizens to "respect their sacrifices and not obstruct them from discharging their duties." This narrative was relatively less visible across the corpus of stories analyzed, even though there was a popular sense of appreciation for frontline workers (celebrated in many countries by clapping, ringing bells, or lighting lamps each evening). The few stories in our sample that highlighted the contributions of individual women used appreciative but uncritical language, possibly in an attempt to keep a positive storyline during otherwise depressing times.

6.3. Accredited Social Health Activist Workers and Media Discourse

One important news story that emerged during the first year of the pandemic was that of ASHA workers who, by virtue of their responsibilities as first responders to health problems to rural and underserved communities, were in the forefront of the government response to Covid-19. Acting as a vital bridge between government health services and their communities, the critical role performed by these workers has long been a matter

of discussion among health activists. Despite their valuable interventions, they have always been seen as little more than volunteers (a term used in the official description of the role) and paid a very low monthly fixed stipend (of ₹ 2,000, increased to ₹ 4,000 per month, translating to less than \$45), with additional amounts paid according to an incentive system that pays a commission for helping patients access various government health schemes (Raman, 2020). A few articles mentioned the stigma attached to frontline workers who were seen as potential carriers of infection due to the nature of their work. Across all the stories featuring ASHA workers, there was little or no attention given to systemic issues, their position in the service chain, or the additional affective labor they are often called on to deliver in communities, in this case, during a health crisis. The laudatory tone used to describe their "sacrifice" and "commitment" reinforced a sense that these are only expected of such a role, thus relegating "care" to the realm of the unpaid. In other words, placing it beyond economic value discourages quantification. This is in contrast to the finding by Orgad and Rottenberg (2022, p. 10) that women's magazines in the UK to some extent refused "the sentimentalized heroic narrative where women are simply portrayed as working for the good of others without any rancor or anger."

The media, during this time, paid more attention to ASHA workers after they went on strike in several states across the country, and while these strikes received a fair amount of coverage in all three newspapers, there was not a single follow-up story in those analyzed that attempted to examine the issues that underlay the strikes or the continuing demands of the workers. Such stories could have been an opportunity to showcase the

agency of the ASHA worker, the push to collectivize and demand recognition and reward for their work. In the current media scenario, where corporate interests and market forces determine what and how stories are told, this is not unusual.

7. Discussion: A Missed Opportunity to Value Care Work

The coverage of care work as performed by women workers assigned the job of ensuring the health of communities during the pandemic was minimal, marked by a “conspicuous invisibility” (Harmon, 2016) in the discourse. While ASHA workers as a group were visible in image and word, their location in the system as women responsible for both the instrumental and affective aspects of health labor went largely unnoticed, apart from a few opinion pieces contributed by health activists and academics. There was a failure to connect the conditions of work with social structures and governance mechanisms, with only *one* article in the entire corpus referring to the “patriarchy” as an organizing framework that constrains a more equitable sharing of care work, both paid and unpaid. This absence of discourse serves to position caregiving as an individual/local community responsibility, distancing it from the responsibility of the state, and confining it to the private or domestic realm. Here, it becomes a “natural responsibility” of women workers, hence while the quantity of work evokes empathy, the value of the work remains notional.

The emphasis on sacrifice and selfless service on the part of ASHAs as something to be rewarded with appreciation effectively keeps it from being a professional norm that can have “exchange value” in the market. MacLeavy (2019, p. 140), discussing the potential for technology to alleviate some of the caregiving burden assigned to women in the UK, notes that “societal expectations for women’s role in unpaid care economy are often absent from discussions of the ‘future of work’ and by extension the future of work in the post-Covid-19 era.” Further, she argues that there has been a general failure on the part of market economies to “culturally and numerically defeminize care work through regulation.” One might argue that there needs to first be a recognition of care as productive work in order for it to first be valued in economic terms, and then to be regulated.

In India, such discussions are further complicated by the social hierarchies that relegate the burden of care work not only to women, but also to women of marginalized communities. The conversation about “defeminisation” has yet to begin, and so the implicit assumption that the ASHAs will perform the “soft” work of public health—the emotional and the surveillant labor—goes unquestioned. The responsibilities assigned to the ASHA—some written in the job description and many others assumed—reinforce her role as a woman caregiver. This aligns with the pervasive social norm of the woman being part of the (established) culture of servi-

tude (Komarraju et al., 2022) that permeates such jobs as care work (nursing, personal assistants, grooming, paramedical services) and normalizes this view of the work, obscuring the patriarchal structures that render this work as “naturally” falling to the woman’s lot.

An “FPE of care” would enable a focus on the structural and institutional frameworks that adopt gender blindness in ways that invalidate the enormous burdens and responsibilities that are entailed in care work, feminizing, and thereby de-valuing the vital social and economic benefit that accrues from such work. With regard to global health governance, research has shown that the vital work that (women) health care workers do, acts as a “shock absorber” in times of health crises (Harmon, 2016), and is in fact the very foundation of a smooth functioning of the global health system (Lokot & Bhatia, 2020). Academic/scientific research in the wake of Covid-19 has also shown how gender and other inequities are exacerbated during the pandemic (Bambra et al., 2020), resulting in what can be considered a “double whammy” for women who are both negatively impacted by the fallout of such disasters and simultaneously required to carry the burden of care work both at home and in their communities with little to no monetary compensation, and absolutely no acknowledgement.

Returning to the expectations/assumptions related to coverage that were articulated earlier, our analysis showed that while there was some acknowledgment of structural issues that constrained the work of the ASHAs, and showcased their demands for better working conditions, there was little to no attention paid to affective labor as a significant part of their work, or as labor that had exchange value—as FPE emphasizes. The gendered expectations of care work were masked by the representation of ASHAs as performing a valuable “sacrifice” that deserved gratitude rather than labor that deserved compensation. The inherent inequities in the health delivery system, where mentioned, had more to do with accessibility to patients rather than issues with those involved in the provision of care. Care itself was framed largely in material terms, rather than something that was accompanied by significant emotional, mental, and psychological inputs that make up affective labor. We may posit that this invisibility of affective labor is a natural part of the dominant patriarchal norms that govern society. Our findings echo the observation of Das and Das (2021, p. 2) that media representation of ASHA workers reflects the “gendered devaluation of care work within a political economy of health increasingly dictated by a neoliberal logic.”

If Covid-19 was indeed to be a turning point to new ways of thinking about work, care, and the well-being of societies, we need a dual movement: one that valorizes care while also defeminizing it. The first would allow us to see how patriarchal notions of care pattern labor markets and differentially value certain forms of work. The second would redistribute the work of care such that

the responsibility for affective and material labor is more equitably shared and recognized by the state and the market. Adopting the lens of a (feminist) political economy of care would center these concerns in global health conversations, be they in the realm of health governance and policy or media discourse. Covid-19 did not cause the gender inequities endemic to global health care; rather, it revealed the gendered division of labor and social and economic inequities embedded in the system (J. Smith et al., 2021). In India, those issues, intersecting with inequities of caste and class (among other things), resulted in an economic, social, and mental health crisis of epic proportions. Incorporating such ways of seeing into journalism teaching and training could encourage reporters and editors to reframe the questions that drive their stories and ultimately lead to complicating the coverage of social issues.

This study is of course limited by the fact that it is based on only three English language newspapers. While these may be dominant within the English language print environment in India, it needs to be acknowledged that there is a large and diverse media landscape comprising print, online, and broadcast outlets, many of which (particularly the online platforms) take a decidedly critical approach to reportage and commentary. However, these newspapers reach the influential middle class and are treated as newspapers of record in India.

8. Conclusion

Mass media can play a role in shifting habits of the mind, nudging us to see the world differently, and over time, perhaps even moving us to think and act in fairer, more enlightened ways. While a critical view of the media may place it in service of a capitalist market, there are elements within the journalistic enterprise that take on the task of social and political reform—particularly some online news outlets such as *The Wire* (<https://thewire.in>) and *Scroll.in* (<https://scroll.in>) that lie outside the corporatized structures and have maintained an adversarial or watchdog role. Covid-19 did indeed offer us such an opportunity to go beyond coverage as usual, and, for a brief moment, it seemed like we did acknowledge the deep structural inequities that marked our health system and the people who contributed to it. But it was an opportunity for the most part unutilized by the large media outlets in their routine coverage, the exception being the few expert-contributed opinion pieces.

As media scholars, it behooves us to take on the challenge of moving the academic insights gained across these different fields of study into mainstream media discourse. While the losses sustained during this crisis will take years to regain, it is vital for us—at least now—to learn from the mistakes of the past in order to mitigate the effects of the global crises that most definitely lie in our future. A robust media discourse that addresses structural inequities, adopts an intersectional feminist lens, and goes beyond episodic reporting of

events would go a long way in opening up that portal to a new way of thinking about women in care work and about the societal—and economic—value of care.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the assistance from Shruti Singhal in editing and proofreading the article.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

8M Demonstrations, the Spanish Far Right, and the Pandemic in a Hybrid Media System

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Submitted: 19 July 2022 | Accepted: 29 November 2022 | Published: 28 February 2023

Abstract

For years, the construction of social subjectivity has been conditioned by the role of the so-called mass media, but the multiplicity of media platforms today contributes to the configuration of reality. In this context, this study analyses how the discourse of the far right in Spain effectively criminalised the International Women’s Day (8M) demonstrations in the first year of the pandemic by linking them to an increase in Covid-19 infections. To implement this strategy, Spain’s far-right party, Vox, used its social media accounts, but it also had the support of ultra-conservative digital media outlets to legitimise its discursive distortions. Taking this into account, this article presents a content and critical discourse analysis of the Twitter and Gab accounts operated by Vox and its leaders, Santiago Abascal and Rocio Monasterio, as well as three ultra-conservative newspapers, *La Razón*, *OK Diario*, and *Libertad digital*. The period covered is from 8 March 2020 to 8 March 2021.

Keywords

Covid-19; far right; feminist demonstrations; hybrid media system; International Women’s Day; Vox

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps” edited by Margreth Lünenborg (Freie Universität Berlin), Miriam Siemon (Freie Universität Berlin), and Wolfgang Reißmann (Freie Universität Berlin).

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1. Introduction

After winning 24 seats in the general election of April 2019, the far-right party Vox entered the Spanish Parliament for the first time. Just one month later, it also won three seats in the European Parliament. In this way, in a matter of mere months prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Spanish far-right became an institutional force with a presence in political decision-making bodies. This would also make Spain another of the European countries where the ultra-conservative populist and nationalist discourse of the far right had gained a foothold. Various authors (Goodwin, 2011; Marchat, 2001; Milner, 2021; Minkenberg & Perrineau, 2007; Wagner & Meyer, 2017) have analysed the rise of

political parties of this kind in countries such as Austria, France, Italy, Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands, where in some cases they have even become partners in governing coalitions. The main reasons for the success of far-right ideology with European voters are associated with public disaffection with traditional bipartisan politics and the socioeconomic consequences of globalisation (Sandrin, 2021). In a context of economic crisis and reduced national sovereignty, these far-right parties promote the idea of enemies of the people through a nationalist, xenophobic and anti-establishment discourse (Davis & Deole, 2017; Edo & Giesing, 2020; Hart & Winter, 2022) that includes a full frontal attack on feminism (Álvarez-Benavides & Jiménez Aguilar, 2021; Sprengholz, 2021).

This study analyses the case of Vox as a populist far-right party. As Capdevila et al. (2022, p. 3) argue, Vox is characterised by “its nationalism (a centralised, mononational State founded on ethno-national myths), its authoritarianism (belief in an ordered society in which offences against authority must be severely punished) and its defence of traditional values (anti-feminism, anti-abortion, family, traditions and rural life).” We also draw on the perspective of authors like Eatwell and Goodwin (2019) to define this party as populist and radically right-wing.

With the party’s increasing influence on national politics, the public health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 would provide Vox with a pretext for discrediting the International Women’s Day (8M) demonstrations in Spain. Since 2018, 8M has acquired much greater significance in Spain, as it has in the rest of the world, as the date was marked by an International Women’s Strike. Although the first strike was called on 8 March 2017, the event received considerably more attention the following year, with a much larger number of women in many more countries taking part (Moriana Mateo, 2018).

It is worth clarifying that the far right does not deny the existence of inequality entirely, but that it appears in far-right discourse solely with reference to the past, to non-Western societies, or to questions that are presented as natural or inherent to each sex. It is thus common for Vox to reference important historical figures in feminism while at the same time arguing that the movement has “drifted towards extremism” in recent times (Castillo Jara et al., 2019). The acknowledgement of inequality also underpins part of the anti-immigration agenda of the far right, based on the claim that the men who assault “Spanish” women are migrants, predominantly of Arab origin (Berg, 2019; Blee, 2017; Wodak, 2015). In this respect, the relationship between the far right and anti-feminism has been explored in numerous studies. Some of these studies place an emphasis on anti-immigration sentiment, as noted above, but they also highlight other important issues, such as the deliberate use of the relatively small number of women in the party’s ranks to act as “refuters” of inequality by virtue of their existence (Berg, 2019; Blee, 2017); the redefinition of motherhood as a “right” of women, rejecting the conception of it as a traditionally imposed role (Berg, 2019); “disidentification” processes whereby men are not recognised as a privileged social group but instead are distanced from those who actively engage in violence against women and depicted as “victims” of feminist persecution (Bridges, 2021); and the representation of feminism as a driving force for censorship, whereby the expression of far-right ideas is transformed into the epitome of freedom of expression and “anti-political correctness” (Träbert, 2017).

These features recognised in far-right ideology in the West are also pointed out in studies analysing the discourse of Vox, where a distinction can be made between

those that focus on their public statements (Castillo Jara et al., 2019; Rivas Venegas, 2021) and those that analyse their discourse on social media platforms (Bernardez-Rodal et al., 2022; Luque Ortiz & Cano Alarcón, 2021). The latter of these two approaches has become especially popular in recent years. Drawing on the study by Jordi Bonet-Martí (2020) of the construction of anti-feminist discourse on Twitter, it seems clear that the “lexical battle” (Rivas Venegas, 2021) waged by Vox aims to discredit feminism with recourse to post-truth claims, associated with the phenomenon of fake news and discursive aggression in the context of the heightened sensitivity of public opinion due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Bonet-Martí (2020, p. 3) argues that anti-feminism is constructed as a “countermovement reacting against the various waves of feminist mobilisation” and describes Vox’s reaction as a response to the success of the 8M demonstrations in 2018 and 2019. The antifeminist discursive practices engaged in by Vox were thus intended to link the feminist mobilisations on 8 March 2020 to the spread of Covid-19 in Spain. In this context, our study aims not only to specifically explore the reproduction of an antifeminist agenda in Vox’s discourse but also to analyse the interaction between the dissemination of that discourse in traditional media (where it is beyond the control of the party itself), and its social media messaging (which is directly controlled by the party).

2. Discursive Power and Ideology in a Hybrid Media System

The multiplicity of media channels today is contributing to the configuration of reality and to the way that humans experience the world around them, whereby traditional media are no longer the sole contributors to the construction of our ideological framework. This hybrid media system facilitates interaction between “older and newer media logics—where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms—in the reflexively connected fields of media and politics” (Chadwick, 2017, p. 4).

Andreas Jungherr et al. (2019) posit the possibility of interdependence between the different actors in the digital environment today who possess a discursive power that shapes key issues and how they are framed. These authors suggest that there are systemic, organisational, and individual factors that determine discursive power through communication dynamics in which corporations also give a broadcasting role to the general public via social media. In this complex media system, the shared ideology is the product of a diverse range of interactions representing multiple points of view that can often result in a “cacophony of voices” (Waldherr, 2018, p. 292).

The purpose behind analysing social media and mass media content was not to differentiate between them but to identify their complementary contributions to the construction of public debate. As researchers, we believe this type of combined analysis facilitates “a more

comprehensive study of the evolution of political communication” (Chadwick, 2017, p. 5). This constitutes a new form of discursive power that nevertheless still promotes the legitimisation of values and beliefs through a social and cultural framework (Kollec, 2014).

One interesting aspect of these new forms of discursive power is related to the concept of homophily. This term has been used by various scholars in recent years (Khanam et al., 2022; Valera-Ordaz et al., 2018) to refer to the tendency of people to interact with others with a similar mentality to their own in the digital environment, reinforcing their own ideology in online communities or networks. The concept of homophily is cited in this study to explore how Vox and its leaders, Santiago Abascal and Rocío Monasterio, make use of social media platforms to offer their followers a particular discourse while also drawing on content on Spain’s conservative digital news platforms. In this way, Vox expands its far-right and anti-feminist discourse on Gab and Twitter not only by interacting with its followers but also through news stories published by the three biggest conservative publications in Spain. The condition of homophily between the journalists for these publications and Vox’s party leaders thus amplifies the discursive power of a party that has exploited the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in an effort to disparage and criminalise the feminist 8M demonstrations through the use of disinformation.

From this critical perspective, this study takes up John Corner’s (2016) proposal of a new approach to the analysis of the relationship between ideology and power in the media that takes into account the interaction between cognitive and affective dimensions.

In this context, the aim of this study is to demonstrate that Vox blamed 8M protests for triggering a rise in Covid-19 infections in the first year of the pandemic, and to which end it used discursive strategies of factual distortion on its Twitter and Gab accounts. In addition, we analyse how this discourse was reinforced by news stories appearing on far-right digital media platforms, resulting in a two-pronged anti-feminist homophilic strategy in a hybrid media system.

For our analysis in the context of a hybrid media system, in addition to three digital newspapers, we selected the social media platforms Twitter and Gab. The latter first emerged as an alternative for the far right in the United States (Jasser et al., 2021), and we were interested in determining whether it had also been effective for Vox in Spain. As the results show, Vox has continued to use Twitter as its main social media platform, while

Gab has remained a marginal option in the projection of its discourse.

To this end, we analyse the connections made between 8M and Covid-19 in content posted on the Vox party accounts on Twitter and Gab, and on the accounts of the party’s national leader, Santiago Abascal, and the president of its Madrid branch, Rocío Monasterio. We also conduct the same analysis on three of the most important ultra-conservative digital media outlets in Spain: *La Razón*, *OK Diario*, and *Libertad Digital*. The three media outlets were selected on the basis of their editorial line, which is characterised by a bias that is skewed further to the right than traditional right-wing views. As has been recently confirmed by the independent organisation Political Watch (n.d.), the newspapers *La Razón*, *OK Diario*, and *Libertad Digital* are all positioned on the far right of the political spectrum in Spain, close to or within what is categorised as hyper-partisan right. This assertion is supported by previous research, including a study by Labio-Bernal (2006) on partisan bias in the Spanish media, and another by Pineda and Almirón (2013) on the rise of the ultra-conservative online news media.

3. Methodology

This study thus expands the analysis of public communications on traditional media to include new digital forms, taking into account the complex nature of the media system today. The period studied covers the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, from 8 March 2020 to 8 March 2021.

In the case of Twitter (see Table 1), a total of 2,873 tweets by Vox, 772 by Monasterio, and 649 by Abascal were processed for this study. To download the data, Twitter’s Application Programming Interface (API) was accessed using Python custom software that facilitates the identification of accounts (@Santi_ABASCAL, @monasterioR, and @vox_es), the specification of time ranges, and the selection only of those tweets posted or quoted by the account holders, i.e., excluding retweets.

In the case of Gab (see Table 1), we found that Rocío Monasterio has no account on this social media platform, so only the accounts @Santiago_Abascal_ and @VOX_Espana_ were analysed. The posts were reviewed manually as their relatively small number made this possible (21 posts by Abascal and 127 by Vox, excluding reposts). It was found that the Vox leader posted nothing related to the 8M demonstrations in this period, while the party’s account dedicated two posts to the subject.

Table 1. Total number of messages analysed on social media.

Twitter (no. of tweets)			Gab (no. of posts)	
@Santi_ABASCAL	@monasterioR	@vox_es	@Santiago_Abascal_	@VOX_Espana_
649	772	2,873	21	127
Total: 4,442 messages				

entails a direct attack on any information, individuals, or sources that might call the fake content into question. Specifically, this analysis will focus on attempts to discredit the feminist movement and its supporters. The fourth category is polarization, defined as an increased distance between the left and right sides of the political spectrum. Of particular interest for this study is the question of how the relationship between 8M and Covid-19 is used to reinforce the identity of Vox as a party, and, in turn, the identity of its voters. In this way, the party seeks to strengthen group cohesion by distinguishing itself from traditional bipartisan politics. The last of the five variables to be analysed is the category of conspiracy theories, whereby events are explained by claiming that they have been orchestrated for “sinister” purposes. The analysis of this category will focus on the theory that the government knew about the public health alert yet still allowed the 8M demonstrations to go ahead, although other conspiracy theories will also be identified.

We selected the categories proposed in Sander van der Linden and Jon Roozebeek’s (2020) study as an analytical technique because we considered it to be a proven method for detecting disinformation. The study by these authors was presented as an experiment involving the participation of around 15,000 people to identify fake news. Their study is also based on the report *Digital Hydra: Security Implications of False Information Online*, directed by Giorgio Bertolin (2017). We believe that in the context of the pandemic and given that anti-feminism is a key element of Vox’s ideology, van der Linden and Roozenbeek’s categories offered an excellent analytical approach for our case study.

4. Results

Based on the application of the template of categories provided by van der Linden and Roozenbeek (2020) to identify fake news strategies, the analysis yielded the results outlined in this section.

4.1. Emotional Content

All of the messages posted on Gab and Twitter make use of this strategy. The emotion they most often aim to elicit is anger, followed by distrust and suspicion, with the clear objective of inciting hatred that is directed especially at the government coalition of the leftist parties Unidas Podemos and PSOE, but also sometimes at the traditional conservative party, Partido Popular. “Id al infierno ya” (Go to hell already) and the invented word “Criminalas” (Vox, March 23, 2020), which ridicules inclusive language by applying a feminine form to the gender-neutral noun criminal, are some of the expressions directed at the ruling PSOE party, and more specifically at the women on the government’s Equality and State Pact against Gender-based Violence Committee, in what constitutes a clearly anti-feminist attack. This

approach is also reflected in the suggestions of “sectarianism” and “political obsession” in relation to the demonstrations (Vox, September 30, 2020).

This strategy is also adopted widely by the news services analysed, specifically with the repeated use of pejorative terminology in their headlines, such as “infectódromo del 8M” ([8M infectodrome] *OK Diario*, February 24, 2021), which allegedly triggered an increase in “infections by 2,000%,” while the Spanish government is labelled the “socialist-communist executive.” This terminology is complemented with other expressions such as “the feminists Irene Montero and Carmen Calvo—ministers—will be allowed to congregate to shout their misandrist proclamations,” and the kind of language that Vox is known for is echoed in references to the “aque-larre” (witches’ coven) that sent “thousands of women to their deaths” and descriptions of the demonstrations as “one of the darkest moments in history” to justify the proposal to designate 8 March as the “National Day of Remembrance for Victims of Coronavirus” (*OK Diario*, February 23, 2021). The emotional tone is turned up in other articles that make reference to “marchas de las mujeres de extrema izquierda” (marches of the women of the far left), “aque-larres sectarios” (sectarian witches’ covens), and “manifeminazi” ([feminazi demonstrations] *Libertad Digital*, March 10, 2020), which are linked to a “bomba vírica” (viral bomb). The 8M protests of both 2020 and 2021 are thus depicted as “manifestaciones asesinas” (killer demonstrations) where “once again, the left sends thousands of people to their deaths” (*Libertad Digital*, September 22, 2020).

4.2. Impersonation of a Reliable News Source

On social media platforms, there are five notable cases that draw on different sources of authority. The first is the use of numerical data to highlight the size of the crowds that gathered for 8M, focusing on a feminist demonstration (without specifying the location) over other gatherings (Vox, March 13, 2020). The second is an assertion of supposed “information” about the government’s awareness of the public health emergency prior to 8 March featuring a screenshot image (Vox, April 9, 2020). The third case is the use of scanned copies of official documents, particularly a memo from the Ministry of Health (Monasterio, June 11, 2020), while the last two examples involve a video featuring Spain’s Minister of Equality, Irene Montero, used in one case with minimal editing (Vox, June 1, 2020) and the other as part of an elaborately produced montage (Vox, June 4, 2020) that evokes the idea of a “candid camera” that “catches out” someone who is lying.

This strategy is also used by the news publications, along with quoting celebrities to validate the position expressed in the article. One news story contains the claim that a judge has launched a “judicial investigation into the national government’s delegate for the Madrid region for misconduct in allowing the 8M

(demonstrations)” (*OK Diario*, March 25, 2020) while neglecting to mention that the judge herself had not initiated the investigation but was merely hearing a complaint filed with the court, or that the investigation did not mean that the delegate had been charged with the alleged offence. In another article, reference is made to a “report” that blames the demonstrations for “causing at least 1,500 infections” (*La Razón*, January 22, 2021), without mentioning that this report was dismissed by a Madrid court in the complaint filed against Fernando Simón, the official responsible for Spain’s pandemic response, on the grounds that it lacked a scientific basis.

Celebrities quoted in the news articles analysed include a former basketball player, Alfonso Reyes (*La Razón*, June 10, 2020), and a Spanish soccer player, Pepe Reina, both of whom were highly critical of the government’s handling of the pandemic, who are presented as legitimate sources of opinion on the issue. In the first case, the article cites a tweet by Reyes in which he asserts that “it has also been demonstrated that most of the people who have died (from Covid-19) are men but we don’t accuse it of misandry,” with reference to Irene Montero’s suggestion that the attacks against 8M were anti-feminist. The second article simply highlights the fact that Pepe Reina liked a tweet posted by the spokesperson in the Congress for Partido Popular, Margarita Prohens, to Irene Montero, and adds that it “is the most forceful response to Irene Montero and her feminism.” The inclusion of these celebrities adds nothing new to the information but serves merely to reinforce the stance taken by the publication.

4.3. Discrediting

While Spanish prime minister Pedro Sánchez is mentioned only once on Gab, on Twitter we can find a full frontal attack on Irene Montero, Carmen Calvo (who was deputy prime minister at the time) and to a lesser extent, Isabel Ayuso (president of the Community of Madrid). Although there are references to Sánchez, the criticism with reference to the Spanish government or the ruling party (PSOE) is more diluted, i.e., the attempts to discredit them are less personal. This reveals a consequence of the machismo of Vox, which reserves its harshest attacks for women even when the government’s leader is a man. In this respect, the study found a considerable number of hashtags targeting Montero (*#IreneCierraAlSalir*) and her party, Podemos (*#PodemosCiao*), but most were aimed at discrediting the government (*#ApoyoALaMoción*, *#MotivosParaLaMoción*, *#GobiernoDimisión* and *#GobiernoDelBulo*). It is repeatedly claimed that the government and its members lied or concealed information, raising doubts about their trustworthiness and suggesting that they are guilty of negligence and of putting the public at risk. In fact, on Gab there are even photo montages in which the party name, Unidas Podemos (United We Can), is rewritten as “Unidas Pandemias” (Pandemics

United) and the heart icon that forms part of the PSOE’s logo is replaced with the coronavirus icon (*Vox*, March 20, 2020) to elicit an emotional response.

In the news publications analysed, the efforts to discredit the government evident in the emotional content described above are amplified in order to attack feminism itself or those who represent it, with a fixation on Montero in particular and female government ministers in general. The articles make sensational claims against Montero, suggesting that she is “heating up the streets as 8M approaches, despite the coronavirus threat” (*OK Diario*, February 23, 2021), or describing her party, Podemos, as a “movement of radicals” who support the “artist Pablo Hásel after he was sentenced for glorifying terrorism” (*OK Diario*, February 24, 2021). In these articles, the demonstrations are conceptualised as a partisan strategy, directed by “Irene Montero and her feminism” (*La Razón*, June 10, 2020), an argument maintained for the coverage of the 2021 protests, as evident in the headline “Irene Montero calls another 8M mass demonstration despite the rise in Covid infections” (*La Razón*, January 22, 2021). The association of the 8M protests in 2021 with Montero is combined with Vox’s call to have the date declared the “National Day for Victims of Coronavirus,” a call rejected by Montero, who is further discredited as a result (*OK Diario*, February 23, 2021).

4.4. Polarization

On the social media accounts analysed, and especially on Twitter, Vox could be said to present itself as “against the world.” Although it places the blame for the rise in Covid-19 infections chiefly on the government, and especially on its female ministers, it also seizes the opportunity to attack the traditional conservative party, Partido Popular, in its role as the governing party of the Community of Madrid, for encouraging the 8M demonstrations. The polarising logic separates those who have been negligent and irresponsible by supporting 8M gatherings from those who have been cautious and protective by rejecting them, with Vox placed all alone on the latter side and all the other political parties placed on the former. The “National Day for Victims of Coronavirus” (*Vox*, February 22, 2021) constitutes the core of Vox’s polarization efforts, marking a clear distinction between those who are concerned for the public and seek to protect them and even take revenge on those who do not, and those who supported the 8M demonstrations and therefore do not support Vox’s proposal for a day honouring the “victims.”

In the news articles, the polarization is similarly defined based on the stance on the 8M demonstrations; however, the “Vox against the world” narrative is not evoked as often, with a focus instead on demonstrating the distance between the progressive PSOE–Podemos governing coalition and the right and far-right opposition parties, Partido Popular and Vox, respectively.

The attempt to lay blame for the rise in Covid-19 infections is thus intended to create the idea of two conflicting blocs, a notion reinforced by the publications analysed. These news services seek to make clear that Vox distances itself from the prevailing bipartisan position, as stated in *La Razón* (February 23, 2021), rejecting the concept of “gender violence” condemned in the Institutional Declaration by both the conservative Community of Madrid government and the leftist parties on the occasion of 8M that year. They repeatedly highlight this conflict through news stories about a debate between Montero (Podemos) and Margalida Prohens (Partido Popular), in which the latter claims that “on 25 February, there were strong suspicions that the coronavirus was going to turn into a public health catastrophe” (*La Razón*, June 10, 2020). *Libertad Digital* takes a similar approach when it places the permission granted by the national government’s delegate for Madrid, José Manuel Franco, for 8M demonstrations to go ahead in 2021 in opposition to the stance of the city’s mayor: “Franco authorizes demonstrations on 8 March of up to 500 people and [Mayor] Almeida calls for none to be allowed” (*Libertad Digital*, February 24, 2021). The idea is to place the theories that the 8M events did not cause the spread of the virus in opposition against the theory of the conservatives, supported by the news publications themselves, that there was a direct cause-effect relationship between the two and that therefore the government should “apologise” because the demonstrations “represented a serious risk.”

4.5. Conspiracy Theories

The idea of a government conspiracy to allow the 8M events to go ahead despite the risk appears in most of the messages on both Gab and Twitter. The evidence offered includes the fact that some government representatives attended the 8M demonstrations wearing latex gloves. There even seems to be an intention to link the government to a kind of purge of outsiders, portraying it as the enemy of the women it claims to stand up for. This appears to be the insinuation behind accusations that the government ministers were “wearing latex gloves while [they] exposed the people” (Vox, 23/03/2020), or that “the ministers were warned during the demonstration not to kiss each other. Why wasn’t everyone else?” (Vox, 02/06/2020), or that the government “went to a demonstration with latex gloves on while assuring Spaniards that they do not need to take any measures” (Vox, 10/03/2020). Vox seeks to convey the idea that the government has the objective of exterminating people outside their group: “Their Spain is not the schools, or social services or hospitals. Their Spain is power” (Vox, 19/03/2020), with “power” evidently meaning domination and repression. Such assertions ultimately feed the theory that the government “is untouchable,” portraying it as a kind of mafia that the courts would not dare to hold accountable for what happened (Vox, 26/06/2020).

Vox’s claim that the government knew that the 8M demonstrations would increase the number of infections but did not prohibit them because they served as propaganda is also reflected in the news articles analysed. For example, in a story on a judicial investigation into the national government delegate in Madrid over allegations of misconduct (*OK Diario*, 25/03/2020), the digital news service highlights the fact that the complaint was based on the claim that the delegate ignored the warnings of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, but it distorts the information by failing to clarify that these warnings applied to all gatherings from 5 March to 14 March 2020, including the 8M demonstrations, but also including a massive rally held by Vox that was largely overlooked by the media. The same idea of a conspiracy is also present in a news article that claims that “the government’s inaction and its obsession with allowing 8M cost lives,” along with the assertion that “we know today that if the lockdown had happened seven days earlier, 23,000 deaths would have been averted” (*OK Diario*, 23/02/2021). This same argument is taken up by *La Razón* when it claims that the 2020 demonstrations were encouraged to promote “the ideological agenda” of feminism, “prioritising it over health” (22/01/2021). In short, the claim is that the government knew of the risks but did not prohibit the demonstrations because “it is committed to propaganda” (*Libertad Digital*, 10/3/2020).

5. Conclusions

As noted in the introduction to this article, Jordi Bonet-Martí (2020) conducted a study of different Twitter accounts that had attempted to link the 8M demonstrations to a rise in Covid-19 infections. His study found that in the absence of scientific evidence, these accounts used “*post hoc ergo propter hoc*, also known as the false cause fallacy” to support their claim (Bonet-Martí, 2020, p. 10). As this author explains, this fallacy “involves attributing a causal connection between two events for the mere fact that one, the supposed cause, occurred prior to the other” (Bonet-Martí, 2020, p. 10). Drawing on Bonet-Martí’s findings, this article has explored this misrepresentation of the relationship between the 8M demonstrations and the rise in Covid-19 infections, focusing on Vox’s antifeminist discursive practices on Twitter and Gab, which are reinforced in three of the biggest conservative digital news platforms in the country.

The analysis points to the following conclusions. While the corpus of news stories for this study makes a quantitative connection between the rise in infections and the feminist demonstrations, our discourse analysis has also revealed the use of derogatory terminology promoted by the representatives of Vox to sway public opinion. Although this specific terminology appears to have been used more in public speeches by Vox leaders than in posts on its social media accounts, it is clear that the news publications analysed have reproduced the

arguments and ideas put forward by the far-right party on Twitter and Gab. The social media profiles of Vox and its leaders have exploited the pandemic to push their propaganda and attack the government, but their critique has a markedly misogynistic and anti-feminist dimension in view of their obsession with both the female cabinet ministers and their support of feminism: For example, there is no hashtag created to discredit Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez as there is for the Equality Minister, Irene Montero (#IreneCierraAlSalir).

On the other hand, the social media accounts analysed all have the common denominator of a total lack of transparency: the source of the data is not disclosed, nor is any link or reference provided to enable users to verify the information. In the case of news publications, the impersonation of a reliable source is achieved through self-serving concealment of information and the use of celebrities who are used as “clickbait,” vesting them with supposed authority as opinion leaders.

To discredit the feminist movement, the social media profiles establish a direct relationship between the high infection rate of the virus and the (poor) decisions of the government, most notably, allowing the 8M demonstrations to go ahead. More specifically, both the social media accounts and the news outlets direct their attacks at Irene Montero, whom they accuse of instigating the demonstrations for the purposes of propaganda to promote “her feminism,” in an effort to suggest that she does not represent women in general, as reflected in the Vox hashtag #NoHablesEnMiNombre (You Don’t Speak for Me).

The fact that the polarization strategy is more visceral on Vox’s social media profiles than it is in the news articles is understandable if we interpret it as part of an electioneering campaign that rejects and criticises issues insofar as they can be reinterpreted in partisan terms. This also explains why the anti-feminist discourse is articulated around the objective of distinguishing the party from its political opponents and leveraging this strategy to win more votes. The digital news publications echo the discourse of Vox, but their motives are broader as they reflect an ideologically driven editorial line that does not have a direct electoral objective, even though it may be oriented towards the promotion of certain political outcomes.

Finally, conspiracy theories are also more explicit on social media profiles than in news articles, as not only do they accuse the government of concealing and lying for ideological reasons, but they even portray it as a totalitarian dictatorship that seeks to eliminate its opponents. This line of argument obviously contradicts Vox’s hypothesis that the government promoted the 8M demonstrations due to its ideological affinity with feminism, as the promotion of a feminist program is not compatible with the “extermination” of the very women who make that program possible. Nevertheless, this contradiction is easily accommodated in the context of disinformation and fake news, which do not require logical rigour or coher-

ence. The argument that the government knew the situation but did not act accordingly is reinforced without the need for confirmation in a court of law. The party’s discourse thus asserts the idea that the power structure on which the PSOE–Podemos government is founded makes it impossible for anyone to find the courage to challenge it, except for Vox, depicted as a righteous avenger acting for the good of society.

The results of this study offer new insights into the use of factual distortion as an anti-feminist homophobic strategy adopted on social media accounts on Gab and Twitter, and by conservative digital news publications. It has also been revealed here that although Gab was created as a social media platform for the far right, in practice Vox’s discourse has not been disseminated on this niche channel as effectively as it has on the much more mainstream Twitter platform.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Carlos Falgueras García for making the technical development of this research possible.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Negotiating Care Work: Gendered Network Structures of Pandemic Care Discourses on Twitter in Germany

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Submitted: 27 July 2022 | Accepted: 21 November 2022 | Published: 28 February 2023

Abstract

Precarious conditions of care work are contested and deeply gendered issues all over the globe. The Covid-19 pandemic both intensifies the (national) care crises and makes care work more visible as a public issue. In this article, we ask for the opportunities, structural conditions, and limitations of voice and visibility in emerging publics beyond established media organizations. Applying the concept of performative publics and using social network analysis, we reconstruct and compare the constitution of publics around the two German language Twitter hashtags #systemrelevant and #CoronaEltern. In a comparative design, we ask which actor groups and what kind of genders gain visibility, and in which speaker positions women, men, and non-binary people appear. The comparison of the two case studies reveals rather different network structures and asks for more nuanced, issue-based “medium data” analyses in the linkage of gender media studies and computational methods. Whereas the public discourse on professional paid care work resembles gendered power structures, the public discourse on privatized, unpaid care work shows shifted patterns concerning female visibility. These findings are discussed critically as gendered discourse spaces of professional and privatized care work stay rather separated and thus risk reproducing traditional private/public boundaries. Furthermore, findings emphasize the importance of “invisible” relational work which keeps hashtags running. Ratios of paying attention from women to men and vice versa are unequally distributed. Females either invest more communicative effort than males or receive less attention for the equal amount of reaching out to others.

Keywords

care work; computational methods; Covid-19; gender inequalities; hashtag; media discourse; Twitter

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps” edited by Margreth Lünenborg (Freie Universität Berlin), Miriam Siemon (Freie Universität Berlin), and Wolfgang Reißmann (Freie Universität Berlin).

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic drastically drew attention to existing gender imbalances, such as the rise of domestic violence or job losses worldwide, that have disproportionately affected and still affect women. One of the questions at stake is how much society values the (gendered) practice of caring: From nursing to childcare and homeschooling, issues regarding the visibility of privatized unpaid care work and professional paid care work have been at the center of feminist research for decades

(we use “privatized” instead of “private” care work to emphasize the cultural determinants of private/public boundaries). Therefore, the present article focuses on gendered structures in the German Twittersphere during the pandemic, asking whether social media allowed for new and diversified forms of voice and visibility in care-related discourses. Taking up questions of representation and visibility of gender within discourses on both paid and unpaid care work, we present two case studies based on gender-focused network analysis of Twitter data. The first deals with the hashtag #systemrelevant

(systemically important) and the Covid-19 crisis as a trigger for the societal re-negotiation of who and which occupations are considered essential to keep public life running. The second case study deals with the hashtag #CoronaEltern (CoronaParents) which addresses the challenges of balancing child-related care work and professional obligations during the closure of public institutions such as kindergartens and schools. Both hashtags (indirectly) address feminist issues of societal power imbalances which hadn't been addressed sufficiently by legacy media. Through comparing the structural discourse formations, we ask if digital networked media allow for shifting power imbalances in contrast to institutionalized legacy (news) media.

2. Care Work, Female Invisibility, and Gendered Structures of (Social) Media Discourse

In gender studies as well as in social sciences and ethics more broadly, care is a crucial concept when it comes to explaining gender imbalances. It serves to describe and prescribe the responsibilities of modern welfare states, to criticize neo-liberal capitalism, or to unfold visions for democratic progress (Fraser, 2016; The Care Collective, 2020; Tronto, 2013). While “care” as a vision is introduced by feminists, moral philosophers, and activists, the reality of care work is characterized by social and structural inequalities. Within social sciences, the concept is commonly classified into paid and unpaid care work, and into formal and informal care work (Fine, 2015, p. 269).

The “care crisis” (Dowling, 2021), repeatedly discerned as a global challenge, does not stop at wealthy states like Germany. Even though gender roles became more flexible, it is continuously women who are affected by the “gender care gap” (Böckler-Stiftung, 2021; Klünder, 2017) and its social and material dependencies, not least in the context of care migration (Lutz, 2018). Care remains to be “invisible work” which is not recognized as “real” work, especially in the private realm (Hatton, 2017; Herd & Meyer, 2002). Furthermore, mothers are still tied more strongly to expectations of “caring well” as part of a socio-culturally constructed “female nature” which is still prevalent, especially in Germany (Vinken, 2001). Female emancipation, which manifests in growing professional activity, produces new challenges as older normative expectations regarding child care do not vanish. On a societal level, “caring wrongly,” or “caring insufficiently,” is a stigma threatening women in the first place. From an intersectional perspective, child care also reproduces inequalities in terms of socio-economic backgrounds. Modern child-centered ideals and the “intensification of parenting” (Walper & Kreyenfeld, 2022) are linked with increased financial pressure which is experienced especially by low-educated parents. Privileged, middle-class families (and women) have more resources and provide significantly more “enrichment activities” (de Moll & Betz, 2014).

Beyond that, jobs in the care work sector as a public realm suffer economic devaluation as well. Many of these jobs are characterized by precarious living and working conditions and lower incomes compared to domains that are predominantly executed by men. In 2020, the majority of all people working in the fields of geriatric nursing (83%) and hospital care (80%) in Germany are female (considered are employments which are subject to social insurance; Statista, 2021). Thus, the private–public distinction as well as the distinction between paid and unpaid work—despite all change—still lead to heavily gendered domains and inequalities.

With the pandemic, care and care work received broader attention. Care became a “buzzword of the moment” (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 889). Many researchers in gender and care studies as well as public intellectuals used the Covid-19 crisis to intervene and to re-emphasize the needs of care workers (e. g., Wood & Skeggs, 2020). Villa Braslavsky (2020) highlights the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity for society to recognize basic interdependencies and vulnerabilities, and to reflect more generally on the societal relevance of care and caring. Against this backdrop, it could be expected that discourses in both legacy (news) media and social media go hand-in-hand with increased female visibility and more balanced relations with regard to gender representation.

Past media research has consistently foregrounded the fact that women as experts are underrepresented in legacy (news) media coverage and portrayed in a stereotyped way. This applies to various national contexts. While Ross et al. (2018) have made the general observation “where women do intervene in the news agenda is in their roles as wives, mothers and victims and occasionally as politicians and professionals” (p. 824), it is particularly the latter two groups that have increasingly come into focus of research. Female politicians are tied to “non-political stories and with greater emphasis on the ‘personal’” (O’Neill et al., 2016, pp. 303–304). Furthermore, they are associated with a lack of leadership skills compared to male politicians (Aaldering & Van Der Pas, 2020; Ette, 2017, p. 1490). Even though other research on leading women politicians has shown that the press represents them as powerful actors as well, references to gendered patterns of the political sphere are still prevalent (Lünenborg & Maier, 2015). Furthermore, problems of gendered representation and visibility are not limited to the political sphere, but also reach into matters of public expertise. In a quantitative analysis of Finnish news journalism, Niemi and Pitkänen (2017) found that the majority of expert sources cited in the news are still comprised of men, regardless of “the progressive nature of a country” (Niemi & Pitkänen, 2017, p. 365). Different than expected, this has not changed during the pandemic (Prommer & Stüwe, 2020). General findings on sourcing women as experts in pandemic-related issues show continued underrepresentation in legacy (news) media (Araújo et al., 2022; Jones, 2020;

Kassova et al., 2020). Macharia (2020, p. 35) reveals that less than a third of those represented as experts or commentators in Covid-19 news are female (29%), and almost half of the ones speaking out of personal experience are women (45%). This tendency applies to news websites, newspapers, radio, television, and also, at least concerning the experts, to news media tweets. A follow-up study on German TV news coverage (Prommer et al., 2021) proved that women in the health and care work sector remain underrepresented and rarely cited as an expert source as well. Compared to former analyses, there is almost no change between 2016 (28% female) and 2020 (26% female).

Whereas gender biases in legacy media seem to be uncontested, the power of digital media to challenge gendered hierarchies is discussed controversially. With the ongoing growth of social media usage, it is no surprise that scholars increasingly address the question of whether traditional power hierarchies also apply to the social media sphere. Feminist movements demonstrate how counter-publics can be raised through digital feminism which is partly described as a new (Baer, 2016; Jackson et al., 2020) or fourth wave of feminism (Munro, 2013, p. 25).

Publics using hashtags to address sexism such as #MeToo (Clark-Parsons, 2019) or the German predecessor #Aufschrei (“outcry”; Drüeke & Zobl, 2016; Maireder & Schlögl, 2014), as well as those addressing racism (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016), have proven their capacity to enable new forms of visibility for marginalized groups, to share experience, and to organize solidarity and resistance (Page & Arcy, 2020). In particular, practices of storytelling (Clark, 2016) are seen as a way to empower these groups to break the silence on inequality and/or violence. At the same time, marginalization for example of Black women and Women of Color takes place in feminist hashtag publics as well (Trott, 2021). Furthermore, social media platforms are owned by (white, rich) men and due to a missing sensitivity for the threats marginalized groups face they offer opportunities for male surveillance and domination strategies such as tracking and assault to control feminist activism (Megarry, 2018). Hashtags like #MeToo are hijacked (Knüpfer et al., 2020), and countered with misogyny, severe backlash, and antifeminist sentiments (Martini, 2020; Sobieraj, 2018). Strongly polarized discourse structures which simultaneously reproduce and transgress established gendered hierarchies are pretty common (Wilhelm, 2021). These specific feminist issues do not necessarily dismantle gendered discourse structures in general. It is a crucial question if the emergence of publics on care work as a subject of less controversial debate, at least compared to sexism or gender-based violence, shows altered discourse structures in social media.

Research on gendered structures of pandemic social media discourse is still rather scarce. First studies about pandemic communication on Twitter find a reproduction of gendered imbalances (Thelwall & Thelwall, 2020).

According to Shugars et al. (2021) women and men who tweet about Covid-19 get equal attention for their tweets. However, they found a visible gender bias among the actors receiving the most attention. These can be regarded as experts within social media discourses—so-called “crowdsourced elites” (Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2012). In this article, we contribute to existing research with results of social network analysis of two care-related publics based on German Twitter data. Focusing on network structures, we attempt to bridge the gap between gender media studies and computational methods. Gender media studies tend to approach social media through (critical) discourse analysis or on the basis of small sample size case studies on specific actors and their communicative action. Researchers in computational methods, on the other hand, often carry out big data studies with large-scale samples, but their findings about gender lack interpretational depth and sensitivity for gendered inequalities (Vasarhelyi & Brooke, in press). We thus present a gender-sensitive analysis and discussion of network structures.

3. Case Studies and Research Questions

The objects of study for the following network analysis are two different hashtags that gained momentum within the pandemic on the German Twittersphere: #systemrelevant (systemically important) and #CoronaEltern (CoronaParents). These case studies are part of a bigger research project on the emergence of public discourses addressing gender inequalities. Based on the practice-theoretical framework of “performative publics” (Lünenborg & Raetzsch, 2018; Lünenborg et al., 2020; Raetzsch & Lünenborg, 2020), we investigate the interplay of different groups of actors in social media publics. Therefore, we differentiate between journalistic, civic-society, scientific/educational and political actors, non-institutionalized media, and private individuals who do not have clear affiliations to bigger social groups like those mentioned. To contribute to gender media studies, we focus on the performativity of gender relations (Butler, 1993) that sensitizes the ways in which gender-related issues are created and made (in)visible. Within this framework, the analysis of gendered network structures is set as a standard, regardless of whether the negotiated issues are explicitly feminist or not. Because different publics unfold in different manners, we compare the performance of gendered power relations on a case-specific basis and seek to trace the dynamics of gendered voice over time.

The hashtag #systemrelevant contains intense public discussion on which professions are indispensable during crises, how they are socially valued, and by whom they are executed. Starting with the data collection at the beginning of March, the hashtag gained momentum on March 10, 2020, when the first substantial policies regarding social distancing came into effect. Whereas #systemrelevant is an artificial word, offering a diversity

of potential meanings, thematic priority is on health care work in hospitals and residential care homes.

The hashtag #CoronaEltern emerged due to the challenges and difficulties of working parents, such as dealing with the (partial) inaccessibility of formal care and educational institutions as well as adopting new roles and practices such as homeschooling. The first tweet in our data corpus was posted on March 16, 2020. While the hashtag had no significant relevance in the first five weeks of the pandemic, it was set in motion by a trans-medial network of women in feminism, journalism, and politics.

The findings on network structures presented below are part of a mixed-methods design that combines social network analysis, quantitative content analysis, and ethnographic research (Reißmann et al., 2022). This article focuses on the overall structure of the discourses and the results of the social network analysis with regard to gender and temporality, as publics need to be understood as fluid and dynamic. Regarding the contribution of different actor groups, we are especially interested in how publics emerge beyond journalism and thus focus on the relational emergence of publics based on communicative interaction within and between the groups of actors mentioned above. Therefore, we ask:

RQ 1: Which societal groups of actors have the highest visibility in their contribution to the discourse?

RQ 2: (How) does the Twitter discourse on care work challenge traditional gender structures?

RQ 3: In which speaker positions do women, men, and non-binary actors appear?

4. Methods

4.1. Data Collection and Investigation Period

The network analysis is based on Twitter data comprised of the two hashtags #systemrelevant and #CoronaEltern. For the data collection, we used the package rtweet for the programming interface R (Kearney, 2019). German language tweets were collected through the Twitter API since March 2020, when Covid-19 reached Germany. For the #systemrelevant dataset, 27,776 tweets and retweets were downloaded between March and December 2020. In total, the #CoronaEltern dataset consists of 55,302 tweets and retweets from March 2020 to June 2021. The study pays attention to the dynamic development of discourse structures. Thus, the datasets were split into several time intervals following the different Covid-19 waves in Germany (Figure 1).

4.2. Network Analysis

In the first step, networks were created for each of these time intervals with Twitter accounts as nodes and their communicative relations as edges. Twitter offers several modes of communicative relationships which fulfill different functions. While retweets and quotes let information flow through a network, mentions directly address a certain actor (e.g., Boyd et al., 2010). In order to disclose the full picture of communicative ties and to determine the network structure, all retweets, quotes, replies, and mentions were considered as edges in the networks. In order to conduct the network analysis and visualize the networks, we used the open-source programs R (R Core Team, 2020) and Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009).

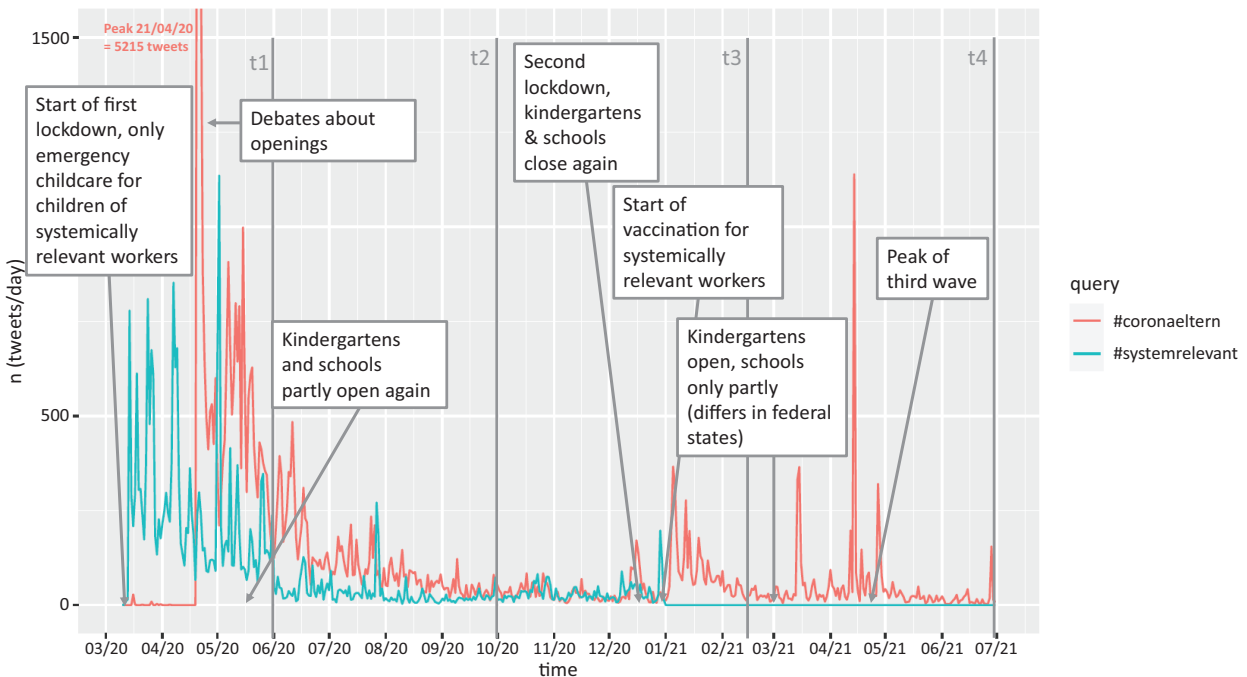


Figure 1. Tweet volume of #systemrelevant and #CoronaEltern.

4.3. Coding of Central Actors

In a second step, the results from the network analysis were combined with a standardized analysis of the central actors. Different forms of centrality give information about certain roles an actor can take within the network. Actors with a high indegree (incoming edges) get a lot of attention and are thus often called authorities. Actors with a high outdegree (outgoing edges) distribute this attention by raising their voices (Shugars et al., 2021, p. 39). Nodes that most of the shortest paths from one actor to another run through, have a high betweenness centrality. These overcome structural holes and connect different parts of the network. They are thus perceived as having the function of bridging actors (Burt, 2004). The most central actors (97% quantile) concerning indegree, outdegree, and betweenness centrality were coded manually for each of the networks. This comprised the coding of the degree of organization (individual or organizational account), the societal affiliation to a specific group of actors (journalism, politics, science, civil society, non-institutionalized media, or private individuals) as well as the actor's gender (female, male, non-binary) of all individual actors. A standardized coding of the profile owner's gender poses certain difficulties. Twitter does not allow users to choose a gender like other social media platforms such as Facebook. Thus, it is not the users that give information about their gender identity, but researchers are dependent on other profile information such as the name or the profile description. In order to conduct the gender coding while maintaining the utmost sensitivity to the self-description, we developed a multistage coding procedure. First, the coders checked if any pronouns such as "she/her," "they/them," or "he/him" were given by the profile owners themselves. Second, any other gender-specific terms such as mother, father, or gendered job titles (e. g., *Pfleger*, male nurse; *Pflegerin*, female nurse) were considered. Third, the actor's first name and fourth—and only if none of the other aspects revealed sufficient information about the actor's gender—the profile picture was taken into account. The central actors of both case studies were coded by three coders each. For both case studies a sample of 50 actors was coded by all coders to test the inter-coder reliability (Holsti method). Values of reliability for #systemrelevant: degree of organization = 0.92; societal affiliation = 0.73; gender = 0.87. Values of reliability for #CoronaEltern: degree of organization = 0.91; societal affiliation = 0.76; gender = 0.87.

5. #Systemrelevant and #CoronaEltern: Reproduction or Transgression of Gendered Hierarchies?

As outlined in the theoretical section, we assumed that the negotiation of care issues in social media (in contrast to legacy media), especially in times of crisis goes hand-in-hand with increased attention to the female face of care. However, the comparative analysis of the net-

works of the two hashtags reveals rather differing discourse structures. First, we present our findings on the network structures concerning the actor's societal affiliation and its gender, as well as the gender distribution within the different groups of actors. Second, we report on the central roles that actors take within the discourse. Third, we take a closer look at the edges and the inter-linkage behavior between female, male, and non-binary accounts regarding gender homophily. Altogether, the findings allow us to understand how the gendered structure of hashtag publics is interactively constituted by its participants.

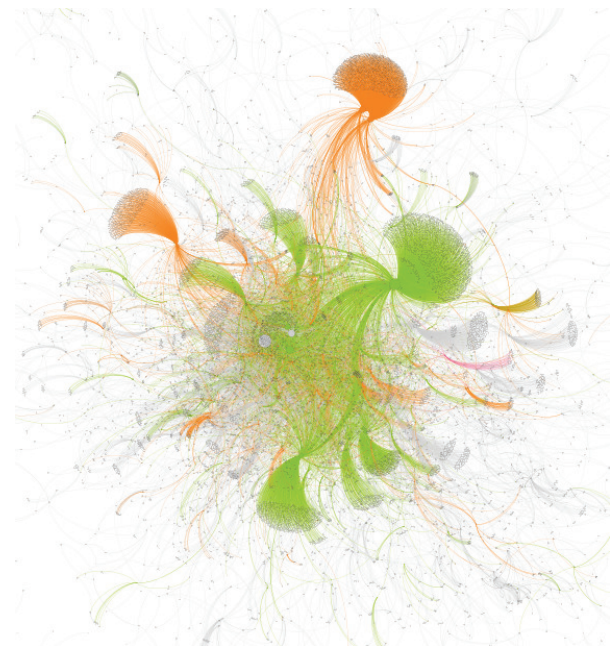
5.1. Network Structure

Most of the tweets including the hashtag #systemrelevant were posted during the first months. With time, the usage of hashtags decreased. The discourse network containing #systemrelevant tweets from March to May 2020 (t1) consists of 14,212 nodes and 30,725 edges. The second network (t2) has 3,245 nodes with 5,110 edges and the third (t3) only has 2,736 nodes with 3,893 edges. Figure 2 shows the discourse structure during the first months concerning the attention that different kinds of actors receive (node size proportional to indegree). The network visualization shows that it is not a polarized discourse but rather one where different groups of actors recognize each other. The network center is dominated by civil society activists and organizations (light blue) such as alliances of care workers, political actors (black) who receive a lot of attention by being directly addressed via mentions, and some private individuals (green) whose tweets got retweeted a lot. However, journalists (pink) do not reach a prominent position within the center of the #systemrelevant discourse on Twitter. In particular, care work activists contributed to the increase of the hashtag's prominence and used the upcoming discourse on systemic importance to reject cheap applause and point to the need for structural change (Reißmann et al., in press). Furthermore, the #systemrelevant discourse shows a visible attention gap concerning the actors' gender (Figure 2b). Male actors clearly dominate the center of the network while female and, even more noticeable, non-binary accounts stay in the periphery. However, some of the nodes receiving most of the attention are organizational accounts such as the ones from nursing activism mentioned above. Neither the formation of the different groups of actors nor the gender bias does fundamentally change with time.

Within the #CoronaEltern discourse, the highest tweet volume was found during the initial months as well. While the first network consists of 11,685 nodes with 35,861 edges, the number of actors participating decreased steadily with t2: 5,046 nodes and 17,322 edges, t3: 3,892 nodes and 8,254 edges, t4: 4,275 nodes and 6,681 edges. Compared to the previous findings, we can observe a much stronger presence of female actors



(a) actor groups

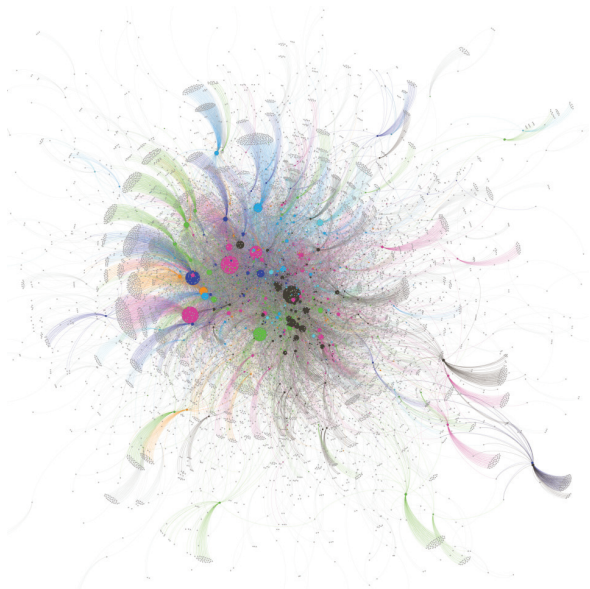


(b) gender

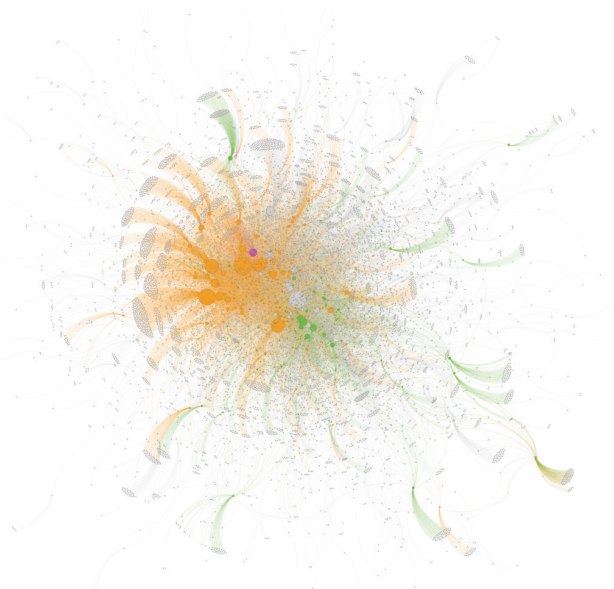
Figure 2. Network structure #systemrelevant by actor groups (a) and gender (b) using the Yifan Hu layout algorithm. (a): black = politics, light blue = civil society, pink = journalism, cyan = science & education, green = private individuals, orange = other, blue = non-institutionalized media, grey = not identifiable/not coded); (b): orange = female, green = male, pink = non-binary, grey = not identifiable/no individual actor/not coded. Note: Node size follows indegree.

(orange) in the network center of the #CoronaEltern discourse (Figure 3b). Even though the number of actors coded as non-binary is very small in this sample ($n = 2$), one of them is also present among the actors with a

higher indegree in the network center. Contrary to the #systemrelevant network, (female) journalists (pink) play a central role in the #CoronaEltern discourse, addressing challenges parents face during the pandemic. Moreover,



(a) actor groups



(b) gender

Figure 3. Network structure #CoronaEltern by actor groups (a) and gender (b) using the Yifan Hu layout algorithm. (a): black = politics, light blue = civil society, pink = journalism, cyan = science & education, green = private individuals, orange = other, blue = non-institutionalized media, grey = not identifiable/not coded); (b): orange = female, green = male, pink = non-binary, grey = not identifiable/no individual actor/not coded. Note: Node size follows indegree.

within the #CoronaEltern network, non-institutionalized media such as bloggers or podcasters play a stronger role than in #systemrelevant. An established feminist blogger community addressing the struggles of care work became an active part of the Twitter debate in the #CoronaEltern hashtag (Figure 3a).

The male dominance among the most central actors of the #systemrelevant network applies to almost all societal fields. Figure 4 shows the gender distribution within different groups of actors for all coded nodes (including the most central nodes following indegree, outdegree, and betweenness centrality for all of the three-time intervals). 415 out of 814 individual actors are men while only 299 are women. Even among medical and care workers, professions which are strongly dominated by women,

men are more prominent among the actors dominating the discourse. Only a few non-binary actors ($n = 16$) are part of our sample, who appear as private individuals or scientists. In contrast, the #CoronaEltern discourse network is primarily enacted by female actors. Out of 916 individuals, 291 are male and 509 are female. The female dominance applies to most of the actor groups. This discourse initiated by some female journalists is mainly driven by these on Twitter as well. Only among politicians, we find slightly more male actors (Figure 5).

5.2. Roles of Agency

The male dominance of the #systemrelevant discourse does not only apply to most of the groups of actors but

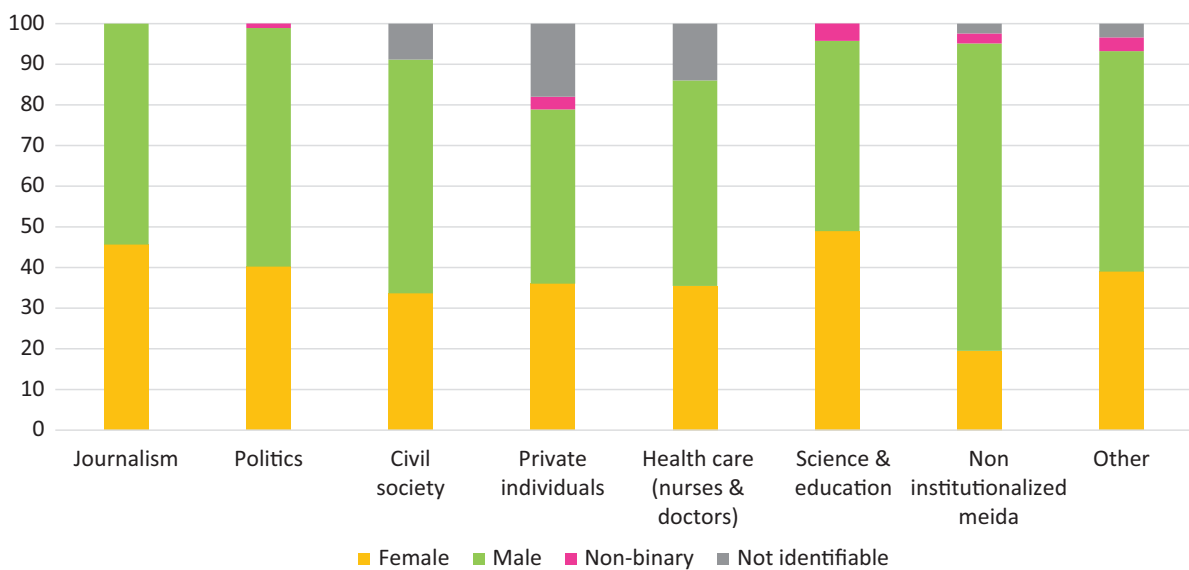


Figure 4. Gender distribution among actor groups #systemrelevant. Note: In %, $n = 814$ individual actors out of 1283 actors coded.

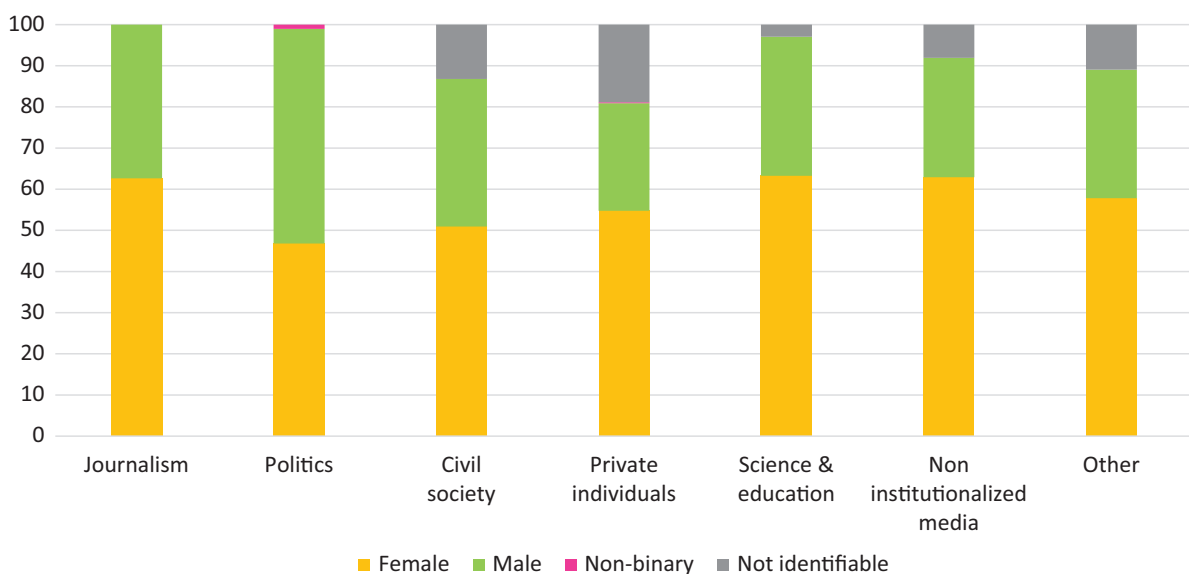


Figure 5. Gender distribution among actor groups #CoronaEltern. Note: In %, $n = 916$ individual actors out of 1152 actors coded.

also to the different roles that actors take within the networks. Men are more prominent among the actors having the most central functions in the networks: They appear more often as “authorities” receiving a lot of attention, as “nodes with a loud voice” who have a strong connecting activity and distribute attention, as well as “bridging actors” connecting different parts of the networks. This tendency stays stable throughout time and for the three different roles with men even increasing their importance as authorities and bridging actors (see Figure 6). However, concerning the roles of actors in the #CoronaEltern discourse, we can find more women in central positions than men. In this case, more women receive a lot of attention, raising their voice and functioning as bridging actors. This trend does not change throughout time in this case as well.

5.3. Linking Patterns

Taking a closer look at the edges, we get further information on how this distribution of attention and voice shape the gendered network structure. In the #systemrelevant discourse, 45% of all outgoing connections within the first time interval originate from men and 38% from women (see Figure 7). Women and men thus have an almost similar share of the attention distribution within the network. However, there were more men among the central actors which shows that women do a relatively more interactional effort. Regarding the inlinks,

a different picture is drawn. Men receive the majority of inlinks (69%) and thus get more attention compared to the attention they spend. Networks are often organized by homophile linking patterns such as political attitudes or social demographic aspects (McPherson et al., 2001). Due to this network mechanism, one could expect that men link more to men while women address other women more often. Our results show that men do link much more to other men than to women. Nevertheless, we do not see a clear gender homophily here. Women are a bit more balanced in their linking behavior but link to men more often as well, thus shifting attention towards them. These findings stay relatively stable throughout time as well, the male dominance in regard to received attention even slightly intensifies compared to the start of the discourse.

While the linking behavior in the #systemrelevant discourse shows men receiving most of the attention from other men as well as from women, the #CoronaEltern networks paint a different picture. Here, women receive more attention from other women as well as from men. Interestingly enough, the male attention paid to female actors even increases with time. The #CoronaEltern discourse is very much led by female actors, who are responsible for most of the incoming as well as the outgoing edges and thus take central roles within the networks. #CoronaEltern is an example of a hashtag public in which female journalists and bloggers as well as feminist media outlets and civil society actors amplify their voices by

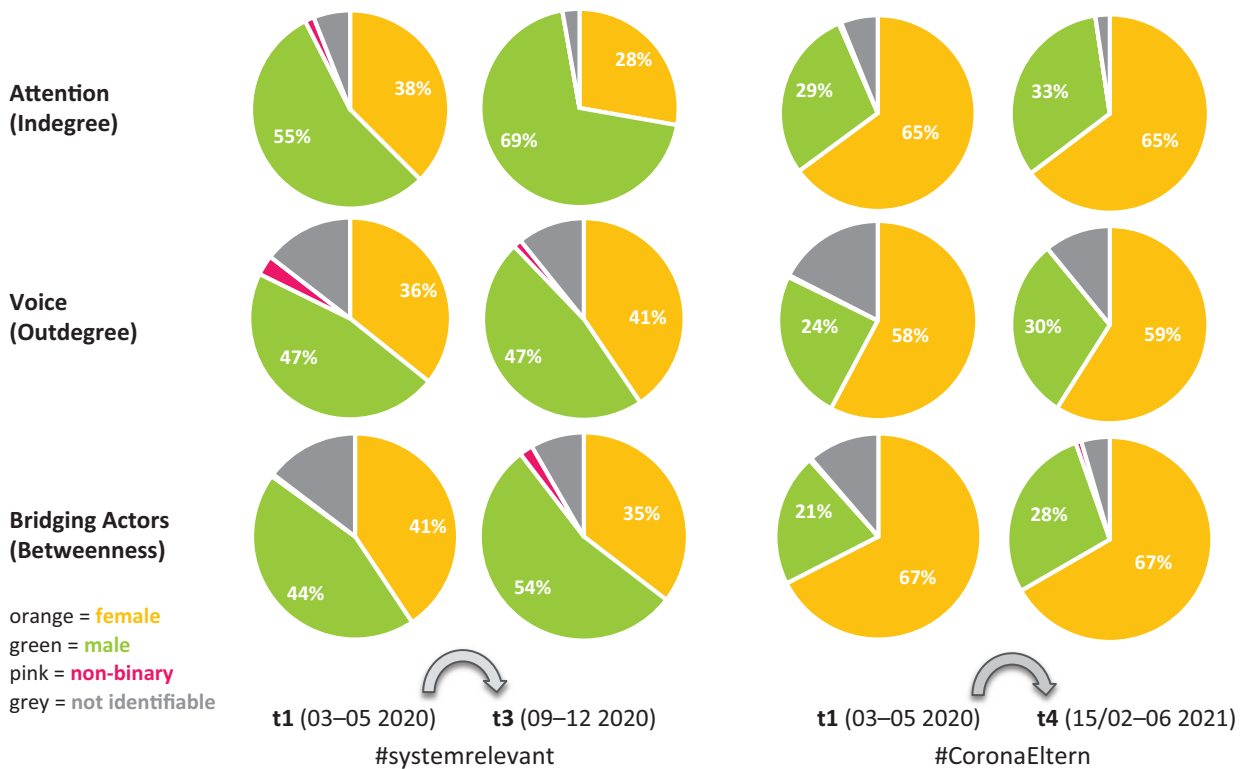


Figure 6. Gendered roles of agency #systemrelevant and #CoronaEltern. Notes: Indegree #sysrel: $n = 200$ (t1), $n = 36$ (t3), #CorElt: $n = 245$ (t1), $n = 85$ (t4); Outdegree #sysrel: $n = 344$ (t1), $n = 74$ (t3), #CorElt: $n = 315$ (t1), $n = 156$ (t4); Betweenness #sysrel: $n = 273$ (t1), $n = 48$ (t3), #CorElt: $n = 283$ (t1), $n = 111$ (t4).

	Non-binary	Female	Male	Not identifiable	Share of outlinks	
Non-binary	0%	27%	71%	2%	2%	#systemrelevant t1 n = 2588 edges*
Female	1%	35%	60%	4%	38%	
Male	1%	21%	76%	2%	45%	
Not identifiable	0%	24%	68%	8%	16%	
Share of inlinks	1%	27%	69%	4%	100%	
	Non-binary	Female	Male	Not identifiable	Share of outlinks	
Non-binary	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	#systemrelevant t3 n = 152 edges*
Female	2%	33%	64%	2%	42%	
Male	0%	14%	86%	0%	52%	
Not identifiable	0%	11%	11%	78%	6%	
Share of inlinks	1%	22%	72%	5%	100%	
	Non-binary	Female	Male	Not identifiable	Share of outlinks	
Non-binary	14%	57%	29%	0%	0%	#CoronaEltern t1 n = 6706 edges*
Female	1%	73%	22%	4%	60%	
Male	1%	53%	41%	4%	18%	
Not identifiable	1%	60%	32%	8%	21%	
Share of inlinks	1%	67%	27%	16%	100%	
	Non-binary	Female	Male	Not identifiable	Share of outlinks	
Non-binary	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	#CoronaEltern t4 n = 984 edges*
Female	0%	74%	23%	3%	60%	
Male	0%	69%	31%	0%	26%	
Not identifiable	0%	69%	24%	7%	14%	
Share of inlinks	0%	72%	25%	3%	100%	

*with source and target node being coded

Figure 7. Gendered distribution of in- and outlinks #systemrelevant and #CoronaEltern. Notes: * = Edges between individual actors. Orange = female; green = male. For example, in #systemrelevant t1: 38% of all outlinks are sent by women and 45% by men while men receive 69% of all inlinks and women only 27%; 35% of links sent by women address other women while 60% address men.

retweeting each other’s tweets and frequently addressing political actors via mentions to gain attention for their concerns.

6. Discussion

The Covid-19 pandemic partially inverts the care process, and—at least temporarily—the societal hierarchy of professions. Suddenly, caregivers—for a long time placed at the “bottom of society”—find themselves in the spotlight, and while continuing their care work for others, their well-being becomes the focus of public attention. From a feminist perspective and due to the gendered structures of care work, we asked if this new “care boom” would lead to a more gender-balanced structure of public discourse. The literature review impressively demonstrates the ongoing dominance of male experts quoted in legacy (news) media. Though expertise in the profession is mostly female, journalism and institutionalized media rely on male exper-

tise from natural science, medicine, and even nursing. As social media has already proved its ability to draw more attention towards gender issues in the past, we assumed a more diverse discourse structure on Twitter. Rather than focusing on explicitly feminist hashtags, we chose hashtags covering gender-related issues, that were semantically open. Due to this choice, we were able to reconstruct gendered speaker positions in thematically less-biased discourse environments. Our research was led by three research questions:

RQ 1: Which societal groups of actors have the highest visibility in their contribution to the discourse?

With regard to the actor groups constituting the two different care discourses, we find considerable differences. The #systemrelevant discourse is dominated by civil society actors and private individuals fighting for better working conditions and frequently addressing political actors to gain institutional attention for their concerns.

The visibility of paid and formalized care work in hospitals and care homes can be attributed to the communicative success of “nursing activism” (Florell, 2021; Reißmann et al., in press). The #CoronaEltern discourse is, to a greater extent, initiated and led by female journalists and feminists. Social media here offer opportunities for hybrid public articulation where journalists expand their professional role and share their own experiences of struggling with the simultaneity of home office and child care. Using their outreach, women organize collective action by interacting strategically with feminist civil society organizations as well as private individuals and politicians alike.

RQ 2: (How) does the Twitter discourse on care work challenge traditional gender structures?

The comparison of the two hashtag publics reveals rather different gendered discourse structures. #systemrelevant discloses a traditional structure of who plays a central role within the network. Although women do most of the care work, it is men who are heard when talking about it. Among the central actors, men are the most prominent. They clearly dominate the discourse center while women appear more in the network periphery, and non-binary people are even close to invisible. While this is less surprising for groups of actors such as journalists and politicians who are traditionally considered to be the ones with high impact in public discourse, our findings show that this is true for all groups of actors, except for scientists. Thus, even among civil society activists, private individuals, and nurses, the most central individual actors are men. Further own qualitative inquiries reveal female engagement behind organizational accounts and in collective initiatives (Reißmann et al., in press). However, the participation through corporate and collective accounts reaffirms male dominance on the level of network structure.

#CoronaEltern is special in different regards. Like in the first case study, all genders (“parents”) are addressed equally. However, women here are much more central. The majority of coded individual actors are female. Obviously, the “private” struggle of female everyday life during the pandemic becomes political within this hashtag. Women dominate almost all groups of actors. Other than in the #systemrelevant case most of the central journalists, civil society activists, and private individuals are female. Only among political actors, men are still slightly more prominent. This result is hardly a coincidence. While both men and women are affected by the “breakdown” of institutionalized child-care services and educational institutions, it is women who not only do more care work but who also struggle with the paradoxes of emancipation (Böckler-Stiftung, 2021; Hövermann, 2021): Due to ongoing societal expectations of “caring well” as a female skill or even nature (Vinken, 2001), women seem to be affected in different and more intensive ways; and compared to men, they

are those who actively make their daily struggle a public issue.

A second feature of #CoronaEltern is the high visibility of female journalists. This is due to the nature of its very initiation. In the beginning, the hashtag was promoted by a feminist magazine and its editor-in-chief. Their personal affectedness might be a strong driving force for their public engagement in the discourse of female journalists. It is primarily (white) middle-class women who use their status as established and networked public figures to draw attention to the extraordinary burden and everyday challenges and to open up a discursive channel to share common experiences. This goes in line with the findings mentioned above that feminist Twitter activism is structured in an excluding way as well. Twitter is known as an elitist medium that does not represent society. Thus, it is no surprise that middle-class women with existing communicative power are more visible and allegedly act as spokespersons for the burdens of (all) women. At the same time, it would be desirable to further investigate differing experiences of the pandemic on the level of socio-economic background and the effect it has on raising voices on social media. Middle-class families suddenly found themselves in precarious situations, which low-income parents—on a structural level—were already used to in other regards.

RQ 3: In which speaker positions do women, men, and non-binary people appear?

As shown, the direct visibility of men and women as speakers differs enormously between #systemrelevant and #CoronaEltern. Gendered patterns of spending attention do not necessarily equate with gendered patterns of receiving attention. In line with previous research, #systemrelevant reproduces gendered imbalances in terms of visibility. It is predominantly men who gain attention and whose voice is reinforced by other participants’ practices of retweeting, quoting, replying, and mentioning. #CoronaEltern paints a different picture with women being the ones getting most of the attention. Thus, a very different structure of gender-specific speaker positions emerges when comparing the discourses dealing with the question of professional paid care work, and privatized unpaid care work. While the former is dominated by highly visible men, the latter is primarily driven by female actors.

Non-binary actors were coded as well, but do not appear very often in our sample. Nevertheless, their role should not be neglected through a narrow focus on men and women. They partly do appear as central nodes in the network either as the attention receiving, attention distribution, or bridging actors.

In both case studies, women are essential as those who keep the discourse vivid and running by paying attention and addressing others. While women and men have a similar share of outgoing connections in the #systemrelevant case (but with fewer women among the

central actors), women account for more of the connection activity in the #CoronaEltern discourse. In #systemrelevant, women receive less attention than male participants while paying an almost equal amount of attention towards others. This gendered imbalance between communicative investment and received public attention is striking in the discourse addressing professional paid care work as a public matter with a high societal impact on everybody's life. This pattern of women doing more of the communicative work compared to the attention they receive goes along with older findings about communicative behavior between men and women in conversations. Pamela Fishman (1983, p. 99) calls this often unacknowledged but expected effort to take up the subject introduced by a (male) counterpart and ask questions the "shitwork" women do.

The relational work of spending attention, addressing others, and producing connections in the discursive network is an indispensable performative action to keep the discourse running. We interpret this communicative activity as a digital form of "invisible work" (Hatton, 2017) which is essential for the continuity and the "loudness" of discourse in social media. It would be too simple to regard the relational activities as a prolongation of domestic work, as the classic domain of invisible female work and feminist critique. It is not "digi-housekeeping" (Whiting & Symon, 2020) that women perform here. However, it is worth deepening our understanding on such background activities and to compare the gendered characteristics of these forms of "caring" for the public for different cases and discourses. Whereas #CoronaEltern anchors in the private realm or transgresses the borders of the private and the public through arranging the requirements of working life with unpaid care work, #systemrelevant anchors exclusively in the public realm and the domain of paid work. It is striking that relational activities and communicative success (attention) are unequally distributed. In #CoronaEltern, women as well as men pay more attention to other women, thus acknowledging female expertise when the focus is on privatized care work. At first glance, the network structure opposes traditional gendered hierarchies of attention and visibility. At the same time, women's share of outlinks (relating to other accounts in one form or another) is as big as those of men in #systemrelevant, but three times higher in #CoronaEltern. Obviously, the negotiated topics influence the discourse structure. The discourse on privatized, unpaid care work mobilized women in the first place, while men are rather passive in terms of relational work. The clash between professional and private responsibilities, especially of middle-class workers, gained public momentum as a feminist discourse. Our findings lead to an ambivalent picture of female visibility. We see more progressive gender relations and women being much more visible when it comes to privatized, unpaid care work. However, female visibility is achieved "only" within the discourse field which is connotated to rather tradi-

tional female domains (e.g., household, childcare, homeschooling, unpaid work).

7. Conclusion

Through the Covid-19 pandemic, care work gained visibility as an essential and indispensable part of sociality. Life as human beings is not possible without the ability and capacity to care for others and to be cared for. Having been the focus of feminist research for decades, the dominant female character of care work, privatized and unpaid as well as professional and often under precarious working conditions, has stayed resistant against changes. In the pandemic, its gendered character as well as its economically pressuring conditions become a serious challenge. Against the background of heavily gendered patterns of representation and expertise in institutionalized legacy (news) media before and during the pandemic, we analyzed the Twitter hashtags #systemrelevant and #CoronaEltern as discourse spaces that potentially show altered hierarchies of visibilities.

From a feminist perspective, it is already noteworthy that privatized unpaid care work and professional paid care work are negotiated in rather separated discourse spaces. The results show a reproduction of gendered hegemonic patterns as well as shifting relations. In comparison, our two case studies reveal quite different discourse structures, both with regard to the roles in which women contribute to the emergence of these publics and the active participation of journalists. This general finding may ask for more nuanced, issue-based "medium data" analyses rather than doing non-specific "big data" analyses. Furthermore, the knowledge of overall network structures needs to be linked with a thorough analysis of contents and with knowledge of contributing significant actors, which is also a limitation of the results presented here. On the level of a tweet and/or other social media content, gender relations—as issues of communication—can turn out quite differently. Actor-focused social network structures give evidence of who speaks, who receives attention, and who relates to whom, but not of what is expressed and discussed. Thus, our project aims to further connect the structural insights with a detailed analysis of the participating actors and their tweeting practices.

Overall, it is of high relevance for digital feminist media studies to do more computational analysis, and to compare more issue publics where the gendered power hierarchies seem to be challenged—in order to better understand under which conditions discursive interventions can be successful, how bridges between different societal parts can emerge, and how new alliances can be formed.

Acknowledgments

This article was enabled by the funding of German Science Foundation/Deutsche Forschungsgesellschaft

(DFG), project number 418375831. We would like to thank Moe Kinoshita for her contribution to the literature review.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Reframing Leadership: Jacinda Ardern’s Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Submitted: 29 July 2022 | Accepted: 16 November 2022 | Published: 28 February 2023

Abstract

Women’s underrepresentation in political leadership has been a constant global challenge during recent decades. Although women’s leadership and its impact on organizational and country performance have been systematically explored, new research avenues are opened through the emergence of various crises. Crises constitute instances in which the intersection of leadership and communication is shaped and enforced, and how female leaders tackled and managed crises has been found to be different from that of their male counterparts in various instances. This study aims to examine the crisis communication approach taken by Jacinda Ardern during the 2020 global public health crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Female leaders were found to enforce a more effective and persuasive communication approach during the crisis, but Jacinda Ardern’s crisis management approach has been grounded in a feminist ethics of care since her response to the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019. This article aims to emphasize the importance of communication in reframing leadership, by analyzing Jacinda Ardern’s Facebook communication from the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis. By examining how her messaging is embedded in values and attitudes specific to the ethics of care, we contribute to theorizing ways in which crisis communication is grounded in feminist ethics.

Keywords

crisis communication; ethics of care; female leaders; Jacinda Ardern; leadership

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps” edited by Margreth Lünenborg (Freie Universität Berlin), Miriam Siemon (Freie Universität Berlin), and Wolfgang Reißmann (Freie Universität Berlin).

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1. Introduction

The global health crisis catalyzed by the Covid-19 pandemic has provided a great opportunity to assess political leadership across the world. It was a time of utter uncertainty and unprecedented decisions needed to protect public health, but also a time to communicate those decisions to the public to ensure compliance with such extreme measures. In science communication, audiences not only expect competence, but also for communicators to report in an objective manner, substantiate their arguments, explain complex issues, navigate uncertainty with transparency (Janich, 2020), and show empathy.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also provided exceptional opportunities for women leaders to display feminine protectionism and to leverage women’s caregiving role in political settings, and these feminine attributes were publicly appreciated in media coverage. For instance, Jacinda Ardern (P. H. Huang, 2020), Angela Merkel (Jaworska, 2021; Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2022; Raupp, 2022; Wodak, 2021), or Sanna Marin (Llopis-García & Pérez-Sobrino, 2020) showed strength in ensuring compliance, while also displaying feelings of caring, empathy, and compassion (Johnson & Williams, 2020), in stark contrast with the inadequate answer of male leaders like Donald Trump (Hatcher, 2020; Just et al., 2022; Tian & Yang, 2022), Boris Johnson (Newton, 2020;

Sanders, 2020), or Jair Bolsonaro (Kakisina et al., 2022; Raupp, 2022). A male exception among leaders was former president of the Dominican Republic Danilo Medina, who made public appeals to compassion at the beginning of the crisis (Dada et al., 2021). Although studies show that a leader's gender does not secure favorable Covid-19 outcomes, women-led governments acted quicker in the initial phase of the crisis and were more successful at eliciting collaboration from the population (Coscieme et al., 2020), and women's prioritizing of public spending on healthcare made them better prepared for the crisis (Abrás et al., 2021).

Building on a growing body of research, this article aims to further "Jacinda studies" by examining how the ethics of care surfaced in Jacinda Ardern's Facebook communication during the 2020 Covid-19-generated crisis. By analyzing how her messaging is embedded in dimensions of the ethics of care, we contribute to theorizing ways in which crisis communication is grounded in feminist ethics, thus starting from the following research question: What are the prevailing dimensions that Ardern's ethics of care exhibit in each of the three stages of the Covid-19 crisis in New Zealand?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Ethics of Care

The debate on the need for an ethics of care reemerged as the pandemic revealed the depth of human vulnerability (Taylor, 2020). Scientific literature underlines that the ethics of care is characterized by transparency, responsibility, and honesty (Jin et al., 2018), brought together by a strong sense of moral conscience (Bowen, 2008).

In essence, the ethics of care celebrates benevolence as a virtue and emphasizes the importance of a tailored response to individual vulnerability, around which it is centered. In applying the ethics of care, political leaders demonstrate their nuanced understanding of contextual sensitivity, acknowledging the vulnerability of certain groups. Essentially, care represents emotional concern about others' well-being. What remains central to the concept of the ethics of care is *care* itself (Edwards, 2009). Tronto (2010) described competence, responsiveness, responsibility, and attentiveness as the four main instances of care, thus capturing the essence of what is needed to restore the conditions that allow people to live together as well as possible (Fisher & Tronto, 1990). Based on previous research (McGuire et al., 2020), we conceptualized competence as a dimension of the ethics of care that encompasses international comparison, expert advice, gathering facts, and anticipating based on facts. When it comes to responsiveness, we conceptualized it as representing acts of information, empowerment, outlying responsibilities, and communicating confidence in people and the system in general. Responsibility was conceptualized as acts of communicating strong decisions, coordination, and penalizing non-compliance.

Lastly, based on Proverbs et al.'s (2021) work, we conceptualized attentiveness as the ability to recognize cultural vulnerability, economical vulnerability, and human vulnerability, with empathy as an essential characteristic.

2.2. Crisis Communication

According to scholars in crisis communication (Coombs, 2015; George, 2012; Zaremba, 2014), each stage of a crisis can seriously impact the performance of a political leader, as each stage has its distinct characteristics. Crisis communication is event-oriented, and it is essentially mediated (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). The first stage, i.e., preparing before the crisis (also referred to as the prevention, planning, or pre-crisis stage) seeks to outline a plan to manage the crisis, research the topic, and prepare the response. Studies mention that already in this stage there must be a crisis communication team in place—which Jacinda Ardern makes very clear existed, from her very first message on February 28, when she introduced the minister of health. She later specifically mentions various ministers of her cabinet (e.g., the minister of finance, on March 16; the director-general of health, Dr. Ashley Bloomfield, on April 5; the minister of education, on April 8), as well as the cabinet altogether, in many of her messages. This stage is also crucial in identifying scenarios for the upcoming crisis, so that the response is efficient and effective, anticipating as much as possible and limiting the damage.

The second stage is managing the crisis, which implies recognition and containment (Cheng, 2018). This is also the stage in which communication is king because it allows the spokesperson (in this case, the prime minister) to make information available to those who are directly and indirectly affected. This stage opens with an initial statement (which Jacinda Ardern delivered on March 23) and exhibits key features such as using the media to push updates on the crisis, ensuring business continuity, and urging people to remain calm. A common advice in this stage is related to the necessity of leaders to be regular in their communication to inhibit rumors or fake news from reaching the public through alternative lines of information (Collins et al., 2016).

The last stage of crisis communication is the recovery (also known as post-crisis or post-mortem). In this phase, the leader imagines a world in which the main obstacle was overcome, and shares what they—the society or organization they lead—have learned from that experience. Post-crisis emerges as a context in which the public becomes more critical over decisions taken during the crisis, thus scholars (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002) argue that post-crisis communication implies efforts towards salvaging legitimacy and/or reputation. This stage also represents an opportunity for leaders to make public commitments to rebuild and to minimize the uncertainty following any crisis. As a matter of fact, Jacinda Ardern often refers to the "economic recovery from the virus" (Wilson, 2020) that her cabinet was focused on.

3. Jacinda Ardern: Reframing Leadership Through Communication of Care

Serving as the 40th prime minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern is the third woman to hold the position and was the youngest female head of state at the time of her election, aged 37 in 2017. The exceptional character of her tenure is further linked to a gendered issue of becoming the second elected head of state, after Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto, to give birth while in office. Jacinda Ardern has reframed leadership and communication in plenty of ways, as her leadership was tested in critical times.

As a self-proclaimed feminist, Jacinda Ardern revitalized New Zealand's political landscape and created such momentum that experts are calling her rise to power "Jacindamania" (Żukiewicz & Martín, 2022). Crisis communication propelled Ardern to unprecedented global prominence, showing that the politics of empathy can engender a real and massive impact (Mustaqim, 2019). Proverbs et al. (2021) explore how Ardern's feminist approach to crisis communication following the Christchurch mosque's attacks influences the media agenda and public opinion. Jacinda Ardern's leadership performance is deeply embedded in the ethics of care (Jong, 2020), as she "made meaning and managed emotions by incorporating care in her symbolic crisis response" (Proverbs et al., 2021, p. 16). She acts as a compassionate leader, calling for closer ties with the community under attack and for a common responsibility to contribute to "a place that is diverse, that is welcoming, that is kind and compassionate" (Ardern, 2019), while also showing sensitivity to specific cultural practices, such as wearing a hijab when meeting the Muslim community or naming the attacker a terrorist—even if he was an Australian citizen, unfit for the conventional portrait of a terrorist. Reflecting upon politicians publicly manifesting emotion, Jacinda Ardern makes the case for empathy: "We're there to feel empathy, we're there to reflect on what it would be like to walk in others' shoes, and if we try to cauterise that, what kind of politicians would we be?" (Gillard & Okonjo-Iweala, 2020, p. 168). Thus, kindness appears to be foundational in identity construction in Jacinda Ardern's rhetoric and embodied effect (Elliott, 2020). In the 2022 Harvard Commencement speech, Jacinda Ardern once again makes the case for empathy in bridging differences among individuals, concluding that "there are some things in life that make the world feel small and connected, [and one should] let kindness be one of them" (Ardern, 2022).

Ardern displayed a unique fusion of strength and empathy in a context in which Jamieson's (1995) double bind is still a struggle faced by women in political leadership; this catch-22 translates into women being deemed unfeminine and thus inauthentic when adopting masculine leadership styles or weak and unfit for politics when acting according to female gender expectations. However, women in politics tend to have greater

emotional freedom than their male counterparts (Karl & Cormack, 2021), which can be leveraged into their communication strategy. Jacinda Ardern's approach escapes the classic bind and elevates her to an exemplary leader, whose "vision for a better world gained global attention at a time when world leaders were facing scrutiny and criticism" (Pullen & Vachhani, 2021, p. 236). Ardern not only shows mastery in relating and connecting to others but also transforms leadership and the way politics is enacted, embracing diversity through culturally sensitive gestures that carry political significance (Pullen & Vachhani, 2021). Jacinda Ardern's success in office is strongly rooted in a particular performative style that reflects "communication skills across mass and social media, empathy and compassion, combined with firmness and constancy, and command of policy detail" (Craig, 2021, p. 289).

In 2020, Jacinda Ardern entered the Covid-19 crisis with the edge of being a trusted leader, rating high on trust and empathy and very low on personal ego (Mazey & Richardson, 2020). Jamieson (2020) showed that, beyond the country's circumstances that constituted an advantage in tackling the crisis, Ardern's response to the emergence of the Covid-19 crisis was a generalizable lesson. The success of the national response to the crisis is largely owed to the leadership of the prime minister (Craig, 2021; Mazey & Richardson, 2020). In the early stages, Jacinda Ardern sought to reassure the public about the government's decisiveness and willingness to be led by expertise and evidence, then shifting to a more empathetic approach to encourage solidarity and meaning-making (McGuire et al., 2020). "'Go hard, go early' was not just a sound bite, but it encapsulated the government's approach to reduce the spread of the virus" (Jamieson, 2020, p. 602). The New Zealand approach was founded on key leadership practices meant to build the trust needed for collective action: being led by expertise, mobilizing collective effort, and enabling coping (Wilson, 2020). Thus, Jacinda Ardern's communication can serve as a compass in assessing a leader's response to the global health crisis. Jacinda Ardern's approach is not free from criticism: Her strategy could be criticized as isolationist rather than fostering a global effort (Simpson et al., 2021). However, the Ardern-led approach enjoyed a high level of cross-party support and an overwhelming endorsement from the public, with an approval rating of over 80% throughout the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, as compared to the 48% average approval rating among G7 countries (Colmar Brunton, 2020).

Effective risk communication was enforced via a variety of features: transparency and the consistent communication of policy initiatives; clear and concise official communication; a government website designed to help individuals, communities, and businesses navigate the intricacies of Covid-19-related policies; as well as excellent science communicators who supported the government in communicating best practices for tackling

Covid-19 (Jamieson, 2020). Top scientific experts were not only present in formal press briefings, but also in Ardern's conversations (Saccà & Selva, 2021) on social media, carried out in a colloquial tone, to facilitate understanding by the public.

Another artifact of Ardern's effective leadership consists of adapting to an ever-evolving situation: where shortcomings emerge and the government largely responds by adjusting the strategy, doubled by presenting motivations and implications for doing so (Jamieson, 2020). Through her discursive performance, the prime minister enables citizens to cope with change and act for the collective good of citizens, framed by Ardern as the "team of 5 million" (Hafner & Sun, 2021; L. Huang, 2021; Menzies & Raskovic, 2020). Capitalizing on shared identities, Ardern positions herself as a leader sharing a stake with her audience in the decision-making process, presents her decisions as moral imperatives, and enables collective agency so that citizens address the pandemic through mutual solidarity (Vignoles et al., 2021). In her people-centric approach, Jacinda Ardern focuses on describing and relating to people's experiences:

Be kind. I know people will want to act as enforcers. And I understand that. People are afraid and anxious. We will play that role for you. What we need from you is [for you to] support one another....Be strong and be kind. (Ardern, 2020)

Through her communication, Ardern carries out a unifying campaign that galvanizes the collective will to suspend the citizenry's day-to-day life temporarily in support of lockdown measures (Jamieson, 2020). Widely recognized for her compassionate leadership (Simpson et al., 2021), Jacinda Ardern's communication enables her followers' resources and alleviates their distress during the meta-crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic (Saccà & Selva, 2021). Her daily briefings focused on open, honest, and straightforward communication, distinctive and motivational language, and expressions of care, including her characteristic appeals to kindness (Beattie & Priestley, 2021). Her empathetic style of communicating does not equal a soft approach to policy, but rather one that firmly walks the audience through each step of the governmental plan (Saccà & Selva, 2021).

Jacinda Ardern's skillful use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis led her to be crowned "the Facebook prime minister" by news media (Kapitan, 2020). In her Facebook activity, Ardern nurtures a close relationship with her audience, having live chats from home, and she presents herself as approachable and diligent, making time for her audience despite her busy and unpredictable work schedule (L. Huang, 2021). Jacinda Ardern's choice to use Facebook live sessions may thus be effective in reducing the hierarchy between her and the public, and in establishing a sense of solidarity (Martin-Anatias, 2021).

4. Methodology

The current article aims to examine how the ethics of care surfaced in Jacinda Ardern's public communication during the 2020 global public health crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The study investigates 44 speeches delivered by New Zealand's prime minister in 2020, between February 29 and June 8. Jacinda Ardern acted as the leader of a national crisis communication team, which seems to have carefully drafted and implemented a crisis communication plan, as described by George (2012). Her frequent public appearances during the crisis indicate that Ardern relied heavily on communication, thus proving she understood how important communication is in developing the relation between the leader and their followers (Gigliotti, 2016).

The evolving Covid-19 pandemic also uncovered the evolution of the prime minister's communication over the timeframe under analysis, allowing Ardern's messages to exhibit various characteristics of the ethics of care, different from one phase of the crisis to another. The aim of the analysis is to understand how the ethics of care manifested itself in Jacinda Ardern's communication both before, during, and after the Covid-19 crisis in New Zealand. For this study, we broke the timeline into three major stages: (1) preparing before the crisis (which encompasses the timeframe between February 28, the date marking the first case of Covid-19 infection in New Zealand, and March 23, which also included Alert Level 2); the second phase is (2) managing the crisis (between March 23 and May 12, which encompasses the timeframe under Alert Levels 3 and 4, and then reverting to Alert Level 3; this phase also comprises the period that was declared a "state of national emergency"); finally, the last phase is (3) the start of the recovery (between May 13 and June 8, when the prime minister announced the country was moving down to Alert Level 1). Figure 1 provides a timeline of the pandemic and indicates the three stages we analyzed.

The body of data ($n = 44$) used in this study is constituted from updates on Covid-19 response briefings ($n = 27$), post-cabinet press conferences ($n = 13$), Facebook live broadcasts ($n = 2$), recorded statements ($n = 1$), and parliament addresses ($n = 1$) of Jacinda Ardern published on her Facebook page between February 28 and June 8, 2020. The analysis was performed using ATLAS.ti based on MS Word transcripts (realized via Speech to Text from Microsoft Azure) of Jacinda Ardern's public communication throughout the aforementioned timeframe. The transcripts are found in the Supplemental File in chronological order and will be further referenced using a code system based on Jacinda Ardern's initials and the number of the speech (i.e., JA1 for Speech 1, delivered on February 29). We analyzed the data using 15 codes that corresponded to four main code groups, which allowed us to examine the relation between the data, presenting how Ardern approached crisis communication from the perspective of the ethics

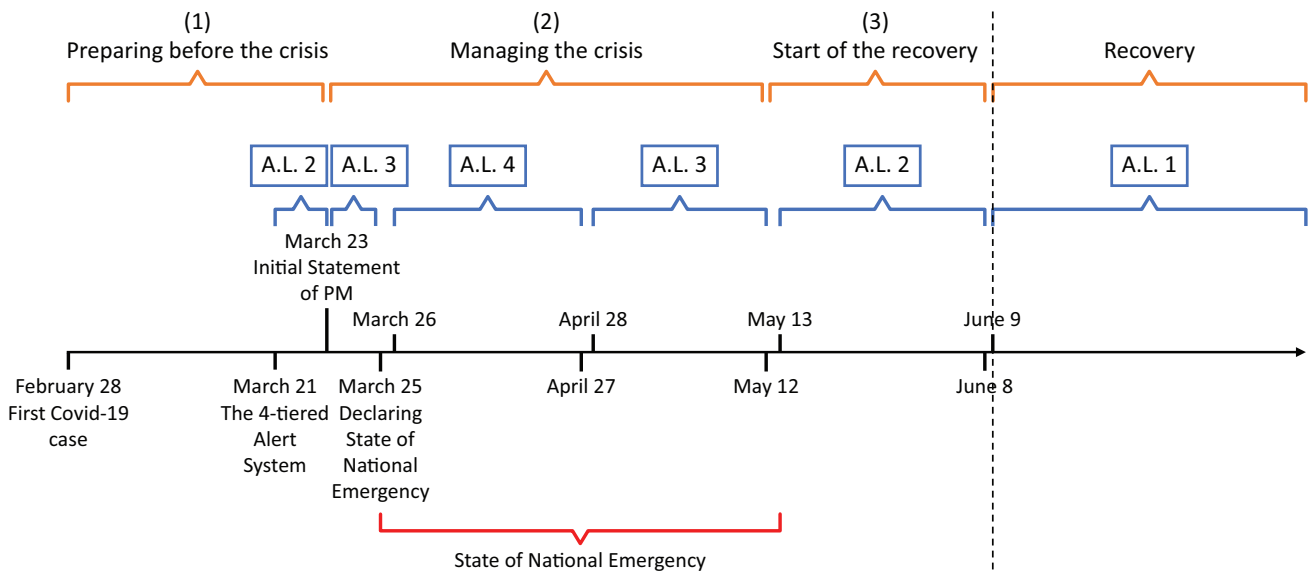


Figure 1. Timeline and stages of the Covid-19 crisis in New Zealand.

of care. Figure 2 presents the code groups and codes we used for our analysis.

To determine intercoder reliability (Weathers et al., 2014), we analyzed a random sample of 20% of the total number of articles ($n = 10$). We used Krippendorff’s alpha for the calculation. The reliability coefficient for the analyzed category was .93, therefore providing stable estimates.

By conceptualizing the ethics of care as a style of communication that relies on the following four dimensions—competence, responsiveness, responsibility, and attentiveness—the aim of our research was to understand how Jacinda Ardern approached her public communication during the three major stages of the crisis. We, therefore, formulated the following research question: What are the prevailing dimensions that Ardern’s ethics of care exhibit in each of the three stages of the Covid-19 crisis in New Zealand?

5. Findings

Results indicate that the ethics of care practiced by New Zealand’s prime minister during the pandemic developed in a variety of forms throughout the three stages of the crisis. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the results.

Throughout the first stage of our analysis—i.e., (1) preparing before the crisis—the ethics of care practiced by New Zealand’s prime minister was mostly characterized by attentiveness (31.82%). Very often, Jacinda Ardern would express her empathy with those affected by the spreading of the virus. In this same stage of the crisis, attentiveness was characterized by Ardern’s frequent acknowledgment of people’s vulnerability in troubling times. On March 14 she declared: “We accept that for New Zealanders currently overseas, this is a stressful time, and we encourage any New Zealander needing consular assistance to contact the Ministry of Foreign

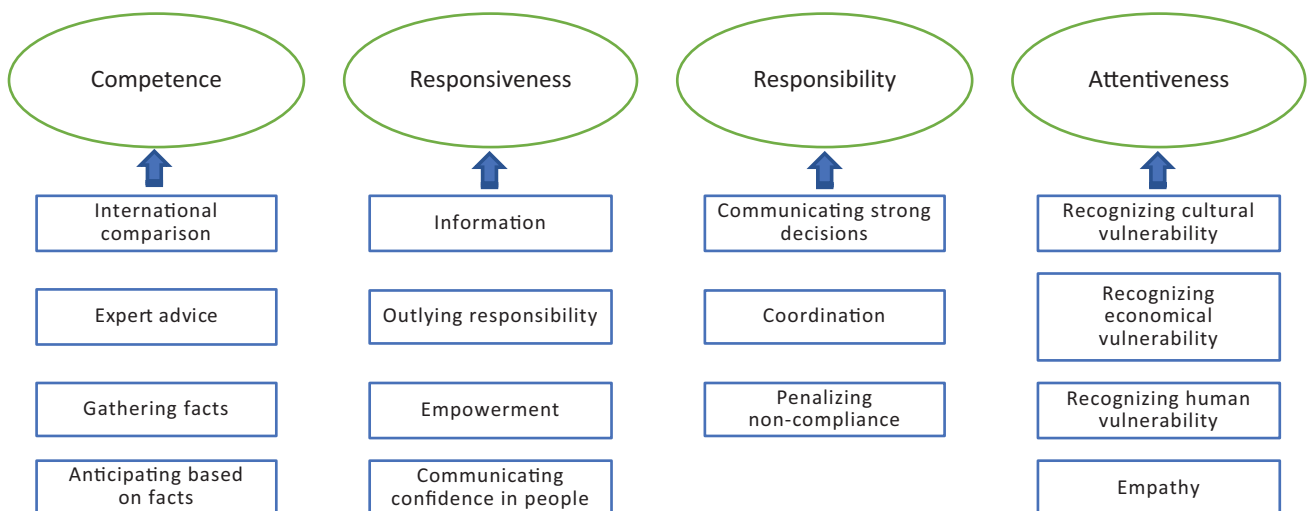


Figure 2. Data structure.

Table 1. Ethics of care across crisis phases in Jacinda Ardern’s discourses.

Ethics of care	Stages of crisis		
	(1) Preparing before the crisis	(2) Managing the crisis	(3) Start of the recovery
Competence	25%	19.31%	19.88%
Responsiveness	20.45%	28.28%	9.73%
Responsibility	22.73%	24.83%	29.82%
Attentiveness	31.82%	27.59%	40.57%
Totals	100%	100%	100%

Affairs” (JA3). Jacinda Ardern also reassured those that were more vulnerable of the support state institutions were preparing to offer: “We will also increase community support to those unable to support themselves in self-isolation” (JA3). “We are prepared for this rainy day” (JA4) she famously declared on March 16, anticipating the difficult times ahead and sending out the message that all efforts will be made to meet the needs of both people and the economic sector. In this first stage, Jacinda Ardern’s ethics of care was also characterized by competence (25%), as she many times relied on expert advice and was constantly seeking to gather facts and anticipate how the crisis would evolve based on the latter. However, the most noticeable characteristic was her constant reporting on what was happening in other countries. International comparison was one of the key features of her messages throughout the entire crisis, but mostly during this stage: “It is not realistic in New Zealand to only have a handful of cases. The international evidence proves that it is not realistic, and so we must plan and prepare for more cases” (JA3). A few days later, she would also declare:

While there remains no evidence of community outbreak in New Zealand to date, there continues to be significant outbreaks in other countries and that poses health risks for New Zealanders, as most cases recorded to date relate to people traveling here and bringing the virus with them. (JA6)

Although to a lesser degree, the ethics of care in this first stage of the crisis was also characterized by responsibility (22.73%). It is in this stage that Ardern stated her now famous principle of “going hard and going early” (Murray & Kras, 2020):

Ultimately, New Zealand must flatten the curve. That is why ultimately we must go hard and we must go early. We must do everything we can to protect the health of New Zealanders. That is exactly why to tackle this global pandemic cabinet made far reaching and unprecedented decisions today because these are unprecedented circumstances. (JA3)

The ethics of care in stage 1 was least characterized by responsiveness (20.45%). However, even in this stage, it becomes apparent that Ardern considers it auspicious

to convey her confidence in how the state, especially the health system of New Zealand, is designed to face such crises:

We have, as I say, a system that is world class and very, very good at situations like this. Keep in mind that the system went through this some years ago with SARS and New Zealand did have a case and the system worked exactly as we would expect. (JA1)

She also repeatedly expressed her confidence in citizens: “Finally, we are a tough, resilient people. We have been here before, but our journey will depend on how we work together” (JA3).

However, responsiveness came to prevail (28.28%) over other dimensions in Ardern’s ethics of care throughout the main part of the crisis, i.e., (2) managing the crisis. Jacinda Ardern’s bet was especially on empowerment, which is evident in statements such as:

Now I’m asking you to do everything you can to protect all of us. None of us can do this alone. Your actions will be critical to our collective effort to stop Covid-19. (JA8)

Your job is to save lives and you can do that by staying home and breaking the chain. (JA10)

Attentiveness came in close second (27.59%), thus proving she maintained her empathy, and was still aware of how vulnerable people were. Indicative of her approach is the message she delivered on March 31, 2020: “I do want to acknowledge that I do not underestimate the difficulty of the challenge of being an alert level 4 for families, for those living on their own, for anyone in New Zealand right now” (JA13). Responsibility accounted for 24.83% of Ardern’s ethics of care, with much of her attention concentrated towards penalizing non-compliance and stigmatizing those who do not respect restrictions: “While compliance has been generally strong, there are still some who I would charitably describe as ‘idiots’” (JA16). Later that month, she used the “team of 5 million” soundbite: “To get there, our team of 5 million needs to have zero tolerance for cases to complete our goal of eliminating the virus at Level 3” (JA28). The least developed dimension of Ardern’s ethics of care during this second stage of the crisis was competence. Even so, like the

first stage of the crisis, the main characteristic of competence in the second stage was international comparison. Ardern would frequently refer to what was happening outside the borders of New Zealand, either to legitimize her decisions or—most of the times—to put her country under a positive light as compared to other countries: “However, we did better than many other countries we compare ourselves to....Your efforts, New Zealand, have put us at the front of the peg and everyone should feel very proud of that” (JA31).

Our findings also highlight that attentiveness bounced back as the dominant dimension (40.57%) of Jacinda Ardern’s ethics of care in (3) start of the recovery. But whereas empathy was the main characteristic of attentiveness in stage 1, the last stage of the crisis directed most of Jacinda Ardern’s attention towards recognizing economic vulnerability. “We know that there will be job losses, and for many, losing their job will be incredibly hard on them and their family financially,” (JA41) Ardern declared on May 25, 2020. She would repeatedly refer to economic recovery packages and subsidies that her cabinet was preparing as a safety net for citizens that were financially affected by the pandemic. In this stage, responsibility was only secondary (29.82%) in Ardern’s ethics of care, many times referring to the coordination efforts the government was making in restarting the economy:

And as a result of our team’s hard work, we have scoped to get our economy moving again and in doing so not only avoid the worst of the health outcomes

others have experienced, we can also try to minimize some of the economic pain. (JA40)

Competence scored similar proportions (19.88%) to the ones in the previous stage of the crisis, ranking only third in Ardern’s ethics of care during the last stage of the crisis. Lastly, in less than one out of ten of her public statements, Ardern addressed responsibility as a dimension of her ethics of care. Figure 3 presents a diagram that visually shows the complex dynamic of Jacinda Ardern’s ethics of care across the three stages of the crisis.

6. Conclusions

The aim of the current article was twofold: on the one hand, to add to the burgeoning literature on political leadership in times of crisis; on the other, to offer a nuanced understanding of the ethics of care as applied by New Zealand’s prime minister through her communication during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our research builds on the existing literature on the topic, as it has the advantage of applying a more holistic approach in comparison to previous studies that were published earlier during the pandemic (Jamieson, 2020; McGuire et al., 2020).

It is not uncommon for crisis communication to be researched from an ethical perspective, as the centrality of ethics in decision-making processes has become uncontested. The type of ethics regularly associated with crisis communication was the ethics of justice. This means that especially during a crisis, decisions should

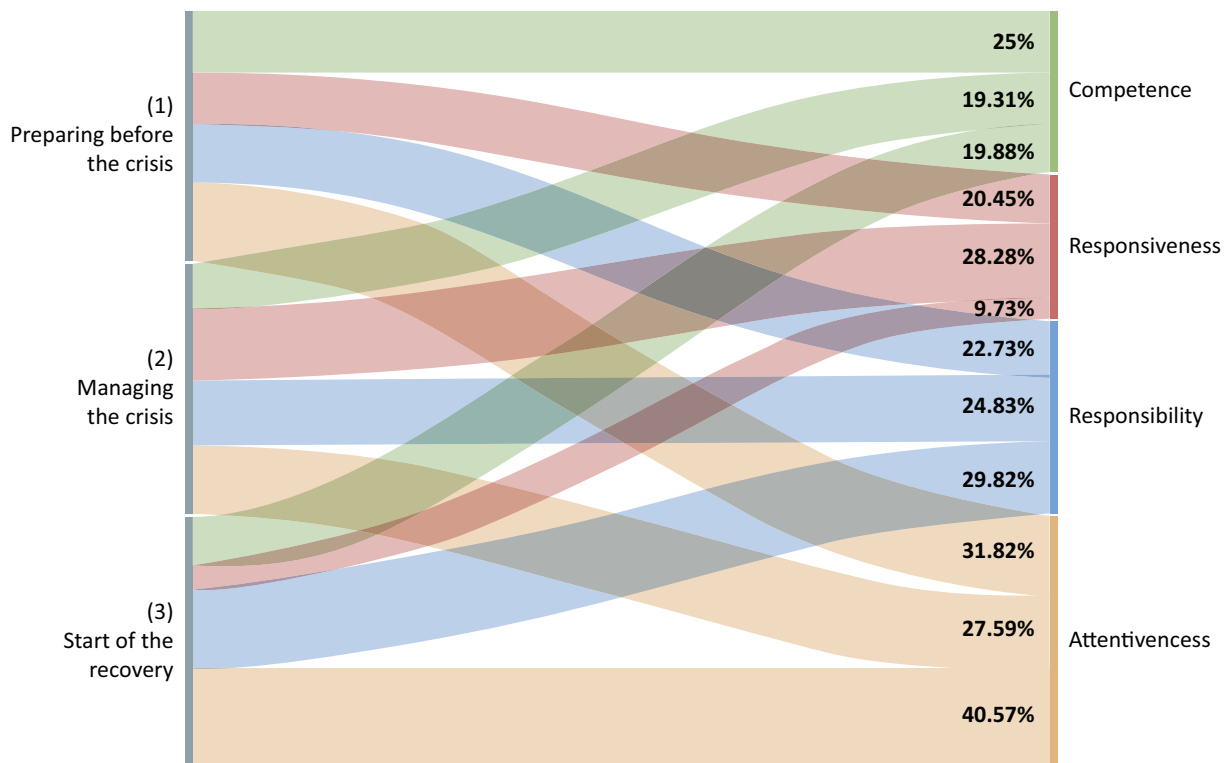


Figure 3. Diagram showing the dimensions of the ethics of care across crisis phases in Jacinda Ardern’s discourses.

be impartial and taken based on rigid rules to ensure that all parties involved in a crisis are treated equitably (Tao & Kim, 2017). However, the need for flexibility in taking decisions during a crisis led to reconsidering the role of ethics, which should ideally strengthen relations between individuals. Scholars then conceptualized the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1993), which was theorized from a feminist perspective that stresses the need of keeping decision-makers sensitive, involved, and responsive (Sandin, 2009). As such, with the introduction of the ethics of care, crisis communication suffered a shift of paradigm. The accent is no longer on the outcome as seen from the decision-maker's perspective, but on how those who directly suffer the consequences of a crisis receive the decisions. Scientific literature also identified that crisis communication can be accompanied by a so-called "ethics of apology," but in contrast with the "ethics of care," the first tends to develop into a normative standard that is characteristic of the post-crisis phase (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, p. 353), whereas the latter is a characteristic of communication from the very beginning until the end of a crisis.

Although Jacinda Ardern is not the first or only political leader to use the rhetoric of kindness in politics since reaching power, her leadership and policies continue "being informed by a commitment to kindness" (Curtis & Greaves, 2020, p. 205), further capitalized on in her crisis communication. Comparative analyses would show whether this leadership approach is unique to Ardern, and investigating her public communication throughout the pandemic, across Covid-19 waves, would make a comprehensive account of her ethics of care. "Care is not a word generally associated with political crises" (Proverbs et al., 2021, p. 1), but Jacinda Ardern's leadership performance shows that care and empathy are critical components of crisis communication. In her Covid-19 rhetoric, Jacinda Ardern navigates kindness and control, and her answers in the media conferences largely feature positive assertions, thus displaying an ethical commitment to actual communicative exchange, as well as the clear delineation of a politician's role, strongly deferring to health science experts (Craig, 2021). Both these strategies helped convey the legitimacy of governmental action.

This research highlights that especially the beginning and the end of a crisis request acknowledging vulnerabilities that people face, as these tend to be amplified in moments of crisis (Yap et al., 2021). Our findings also reflect the fact that as a crisis deepens, responsiveness should be enhanced, since it allows communication to flow both ways between a leader and their followers (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). Empowerment, expressing confidence in one another, and understanding where responsibilities begin and where they end could aid the efforts of both parties. Jacinda Ardern's handling of the pandemic represents a relative success, but it is not a recipe for perfection in political communication. However, amid dire straits for leadership all around the

world, her ethics of care provides a model that, if replicated, would aid communication in times of crisis.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by a grant from the Ministry of Research, Innovation, and Digitalization (Romania), CNCS—UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-PD-2021-0267, within PNCDI III.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

Cartographies of Resistance: Counter-Data Mapping as the New Frontier of Digital Media Activism

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Submitted: 29 July 2022 | Accepted: 8 February 2023 | Published: 28 February 2023

Abstract

In the first datified pandemic, the production of interactive Covid-19 data maps was intensified by state institutions and corporate media. Maps have been used by states and citizens to understand the advance and retreat of the contagion and monitor vaccine rates. However, the visualisations being used are often based on non-comparable data types across countries, leading to visual misrepresentations. Many pandemic data visualisations have consequently had a negative impact on public debate, contributing to an infodemic of disinformation that has stigmatised marginalised groups and detracted from social justice objectives. Counter to such hegemonic mapping, counter-data maps, produced by marginalised groups, have revealed hidden inequalities, supporting calls for intersectional health justice. This article investigates the ways in which various intersectional global communities have appropriated data, produced counter-data maps, unveiled hidden social realities, and generated more authentic social meanings through emergent counter-data mapping imaginaries. We use a comparative multi-case study, based on a netnography of three Covid-19 data mapping projects, namely Data for Black Lives (US), Indigenous Emergency (Brazil), and CityLab maps (global). Our findings indicate that counter-data mapping imaginaries are deeply embedded in community-oriented notions of spatiality and relationality. Moreover, the cartographic process tends to reflect alternative imaginaries through four key dimensions of data mapping practice—objectives, uses, production, and ownership. We argue that counter-data mapping is the new frontier of digital media activism and community communication, as it extends the projects of data justice and community media activism, generating new practices in the activist repertoire of communicative action.

Keywords

activist maps; CityLab; Covid-19; Data for Black Lives; data imaginaries; data justice; data mapping; Indigenous Emergency

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps” edited by Margreth Lünenborg (Freie Universität Berlin), Miriam Siemon (Freie Universität Berlin), and Wolfgang Reißmann (Freie Universität Berlin).

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1. Introduction

During Covid-19, the “first pandemic of the datified society” (Milan et al., 2021, p. 100), interactive digital maps became an important aspect of everyday life (Kent, 2020; Sloane & Kraemer, 2020). Produced and disseminated by state authorities, research institutions, and the media to disseminate knowledge about the pandemic, these maps

have transformed geospatial data into dominant everyday cartographies of the pandemic.

Hegemonic maps can be defined as visualisations produced by dominant global institutions, reflecting Western epistemological frameworks. Kitchin (2005, p. 2) argues that “Anglo-American academics and institutions...maintain a global hegemony in relation to the discipline of geography, exerting an unequal influence

in relation to what kinds of geography and geographical practices are to be valued.” Hegemonic pandemic maps have been widely circulated in the global media-scape, serving as reference points for diffuse publics, thus acquiring an official status (Kent, 2020).

Global Covid-19 data maps, however, are often generated from data types that are non-comparable for several reasons, including variations in reporting criteria and timeframes among countries; non-normalized data mapping; state interests invested in collecting, organising, distributing, or hiding data; interpretations introduced into the data by analytics and analysts alike—all leading to visual misrepresentations (Kent, 2020).

Such misrepresentations have consequences for democratic, informational, and public health systems. Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) has found that hegemonic data visualisations have negatively impacted public debate during the pandemic. Moreover, scholars have found that hegemonic data maps have contributed to the *infodemic* of disinformation on Covid-19, leading to unscientific public policy (Mooney & Juhász, 2020). Further, Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) has found that hegemonic Covid-19 mapping has impeded activists from advocating for social and health justice.

In contrast, communities have created counter-data maps to address their needs for Covid-19-related information and services. Following Kidd (2019), we define counter-mapping as any mapping activity that challenges dominant big-data and cartographic processes. Kent (2020, p. 189) asserts that “counter-mapping aims to reverse power asymmetries,” challenging power-inflected representations of hegemonic maps. Activists have re-appropriated big data and created counter-datasets to develop counter-mapping visualisations. Conjoining data and mapping, we define *counter-data mapping* as practices that integrate resistant data appropriations into counter-mapping processes, with the objective of challenging power asymmetries.

In this article, we present a comparative multi-case study (Yin, 2009) involving three counter-data mapping projects—Data for Black Lives in the US, Indigenous Emergency in Brazil, and global CityLab maps. The aim is to draw cross-case conclusions (Yin, 2009) that shed light on counter-data mapping using the specific frame of the pandemic. These cases met our criteria of representing alternatives to hegemonic maps, often visualised through intersectional axes of racialized, gendered, and colonial oppression, structures reproduced by hegemonic Covid-19 maps (Kent, 2020). We combine netnography (Kozinets, 2019) and critical visual analysis (Ledin & Machin, 2018) to examine community uses of intersectional counter-data mapping practices and imaginaries.

Data activist imaginaries (Neumayer et al., 2021, p. 5) emerge as “data are believed to have the capacity to measure, represent or unveil social phenomena.” Counter-data analytics and counter-data mapping, by extension, are understood to both construct and reveal social meanings for communities. *Data mapping imaginaries* that

underlie counter-data mapping practices are important to understand as they inform communicative practices of resistant data appropriation and data mapping, while not being data-centric, constructing alternative social practices and social imaginaries in relation to data.

Below we introduce a theoretical framework encompassing datafication, hegemonic maps, and technified space-making, followed by research questions and methodology. We then present our findings, arguing that counter-data mapping practices and imaginaries have the potential to foster self-determined communities through cartographies of resistance. Further, we explore how four key counter-data mapping practices—with respect to uses, production, objectives, and ownership—relate to specific counter-data mapping imaginaries. Finally, we argue that counter-data mapping represents a new frontier of digital media activism and community communication.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Datafication, Data Colonialism, and Resistant Data Appropriation

Datafication is defined as “the wider *transformation of human life* so that its elements can be a continual source of data” (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, p. 2, italics in original). This is the mechanism of data colonialism with the expansion of colonial resource extraction to include data extraction. Organisations predominantly located in higher-income countries tend to extract and profit from data collected through digital labour in lower-income countries, and from marginalised communities in higher-income countries, with intersections across race, class, and gender (Madianou, 2019).

Data colonialism is therefore defined as the extraction of data from marginalised populations by tech corporations typically headquartered in higher-income countries (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Examples include the collection and resale of geotagging information of migrants or the constant monitoring and reselling of intimate social media data by, for instance, Tinder or Foursquare (Thatcher et al., 2016). A third example includes the use of biometric data collected in a national digital identity program in Zimbabwe being reused by Chinese AI company Cloudwalk to develop facial recognition algorithms that are then sold worldwide (Madianou, 2019, p. 9). These colonial data extraction dynamics have intensified during the pandemic in two key ways. First, global knowledge about the pandemic is dependent on the extraction and compilation of various data types, which are rendered into data maps that reflect hegemonic economic and political interests. Second, global pandemic data have not typically been made available in useful ways for marginalised communities, as the pandemic has given rise to the “data poor”—communities absent from big-data narratives (Milan & Tréré, 2020). This effect of data colonialism is an aspect of precarity

under neoliberal regimes in which all realms of human life are subjected to the mediation of neocolonial data markets dominated by big technology (Reguillo, 2017).

Emerging in relation to colonialism, *coloniality* is an epistemological framework that creates hierarchies of knowledge, the prevailing logic remaining after the historical process of colonisation came to an end (Mignolo, 2007). In coloniality, a path of linear development should culminate in Western ways of living, whereby the non-West is either invisible or considered primitive, uncivilised, or still “developing” (de Sousa Santos, 2015). Coloniality has been replicated through hegemonic data maps, shaped through data colonialism, and a tangible communicative form of coloniality is evident in data extraction, data structures, and data poverty.

Hegemonic data and algorithmic structures reproduce not only coloniality but also race, class, and gender discrimination (Noble, 2018; O’Neil, 2016; Sandvig et al., 2016; Wachter-Boettcher, 2017). During the pandemic, existing inequalities intensified during lockdowns. White-collar jobs could accommodate working from home, while the service industry could not. These employment categories break down along racialized and gendered lines, with Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour and/or women more often employed in the service industry, and thus put at greater risk of exposure to Covid-19 (Milan & Treré, 2020). Data revealing these amplified inequalities, including data colonialism, however, were not typically represented in mainstream media or hegemonic data maps.

An epistemological framework that contests hegemonic communications, critical coloniality helps us better understand community activist practices engaged in resistance to datafication (Ricaurte, 2019). Critical coloniality, as a multidimensional concept, can help to explain *resistant data appropriation*, which we figure as a step beyond resistance to datafication. Resistant data appropriation includes the construction of subaltern datasets and the repurposing of big data for socio-political resistance, a community communication practice that both uses and contests new data technologies. Resistant data appropriation moves beyond technologically deterministic calls for digital inclusion that assume merely granting access to technologies—such as devices or broadband internet—will correct the underlying intersectional social inequalities and structures (Robinson et al., 2020).

2.2. Hegemonic Cartographies as Technified Space-Making

Hegemonic Covid-19 data maps have amplified the political power of globally dominant groups. An illustrative example is the US-based Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Research Center (2020) near-real-time global map, representing the daily progression of the pandemic, including cases, deaths, and vaccinations. It uses a colour scheme of saturated reds, oranges, and greens against a black

background, with red signifying crisis, disease, alarm, and danger (Kent, 2020). This map, “possibly the leading apparatus of global situational awareness regarding Covid-19,” (Kent, 2020, p. 187), is an example of technified space-making with hegemonic institutional objectives, amplifying crisis communications. Covid-19 maps such as this, produced by globally hegemonic research or state institutions, are often, in turn, widely circulated by hegemonic media institutions such as CNN, the BBC, and *The New York Times*, in the same locations of global power.

Maps of this nature are therefore clearly representations of power. They define and construct space, naming and thus circumscribing communities and the places where they exist. Hegemonic maps direct urban planning, shaping future spatial decisions and policies (Boeing, 2021; Vaughan, 2018) and organising space in ways that amplify existing oppressions, express hegemonic desires and imaginaries, and render invisible the important relations among people, animals, and ecosystems. Hegemonic Covid-19 maps, in particular, amplify interlocking structures of oppression including the state, capitalism, colonialism, race, gender, and health.

Also imbued with power, algorithms that process and visualise data tend to amplify intersectional oppressions through social sorting, the process of managing categories of people in datasets, which reproduces inequitable social outcomes (Dencik et al., 2019; Lyon, 2006; Monahan, 2008; O’Neil, 2016). A cogent example of social sorting is the discriminatory racialized effects of surveillance after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Towers. Islamophobia was coded into datasets, sorting citizens into Muslim and non-Muslim, resulting in systemic harassment in border checks, immigration, policing, education, hiring, and cultural institutions (Lyon, 2006). Social sorting algorithms have been shown to reproduce racial oppression (Noble, 2018), gender invisibility (Perez, 2019), and data poverty (Milan & Treré, 2020). This reinforces negative impacts on the most vulnerable (Langlois et al., 2015), for example, through surveillance and social control of welfare recipients while providing benefits for the wealthy through membership in frequent flyer or hotel booking programs (Jeppesen & Nazar, 2012). Big data and algorithms, including those producing hegemonic data maps, facilitate intersectional capitalist agendas while limiting democratic participation (Langlois et al., 2015), contributing to discriminatory technified space-making.

Brazilian geographer Santos (2006) has discussed how the interplay between technology and human action constructs spaces unequally, with digital information playing a central role in the “making” of a territory by uniting its different parts. He notes that centralised control and hierarchical information flows can lead to inequalitarian social structures, where essential information is transmitted predominantly in exclusive circles, leading to the entrenchment of data colonialism. Regarding the specific intersections of poverty, race, and colonialism,

for example, data mapping can frame low-income areas as violent, stigmatising communities through spatialized terms like ghetto, favela, and slum.

Hegemonic maps, big data, and algorithms thus reproduce cartographies of power, reinforcing hegemonic communicative dynamics through a growing reliance on state and capitalist datasets as territorial representations that render intersectional inequalities both immobile and invisible. “There is more, therefore, to be gained from the processes of mapping and counter-mapping Covid-19 than calculating risk and resolving information anxiety” (Kent, 2020, p. 191). In this context, it becomes vital to understand how resistant data appropriation and counter-data mapping serve to challenge the intersectional power structures embedded in hegemonic cartographies.

2.3. Counter-Data Mapping

Counter-data maps challenge hegemonic narratives through a process of social cartography (Vaughan, 2018). Grassroots mapmakers reinvent themselves as digital media and community communication activists contributing to the data justice repertoire of contention (Dencik et al., 2019). Countering the data narratives of hegemonic maps, community-produced maps can resist dominant representations of the pandemic, providing greater visibility, specificity, and nuance regarding the communities and territories mapped. Counter-data narratives are grounded in community experience, subjectivities, and epistemologies. *Counter-data mapping* can thus be defined as a political practice through which “groups normally excluded from political decision-making deploy maps and other geographic data to communicate complex information about inequality in an easy-to-understand visual format” (Inwood & Alderman, 2020). Engaging in resistant data appropriations to create pandemic maps, marginalised groups have used counter-data mapping to unveil health inequalities, amplifying activist actions to combat the deleterious effects of the pandemic for intersectionally-oppressed groups (Pelizza et al., 2020).

Counter-data mapping practices are grounded in and emerge out of counter-data imaginaries. Data imaginaries are the:

Ways in which individuals, communities, and societies imagine or conceive of their relationship to the datasets produced by social media and other big data sources, including their internalised perception of how big data may be able to either represent or invisibilise something important to them. (Jeppesen, 2023, pp. 122–123)

Counter-data imaginaries, by extension, locate agency in the process of self-producing counter-datasets and counter-maps, in opposition to the explicitly commercial goals of corporations and the social-control objectives of

nation-states that reduce, delimit, or even eliminate citizen agency. Counter-data practices reveal counter-data imaginaries through the ways in which collectivities appropriate data to visualise community experiences and epistemologies. Counter-data mapping “reconsiders relations between states, citizens and digital technologies in the production of data and statistics by imagining a new political subjectivity, that of the data citizen” (Lösch et al., 2019, p. 10). The counter-data mapping practices of the data citizen relate not just to data, but also to the communities’ counter-data imaginaries, which in turn influence their counter-data mapping practices. Taken together, counter-data mapping practices and imaginaries allow communities to reimagine and reshape social realities.

3. Methodology

To better understand counter-data mapping in marginalised communities during the pandemic, we set out with the following research questions: (a) How do communities and activists appropriate existing datasets or develop community-based datasets to create counter-data maps? (b) What are the counter-data mapping practices engaged by activists to visualise and make visible their communities? (c) What are the counter-data mapping imaginaries of communities that emerge through an analysis of their counter-data mapping practices?

We conducted a multi-case study (Yin, 2009) of three counter-data mapping projects in February and March 2020, using the netnographic strategy of immersive engagement (Kozinets, 2019). Considering three data sites (described below), we performed data collection operations that consisted of collecting and analysing online traces comprising the maps created by communities in this period. Departing from traditional netnography, we did not observe social media interactions but focused on digital and interactive representations of space through resistant data appropriation. Considering digital media as both an object of interest and an approach to understanding practices (Pink et al., 2015), we conducted analysis and interpretation operations (Kozinets, 2019) of the pages, data maps, and data charts available, including the context and discourses in which they were embedded and engaged.

We also analysed visual aspects of the maps (Ledin & Machin, 2018) to understand counter-hegemonic spatial representations as resistant strategies to visual misrepresentations, social-control datafication, and data colonialism. We inductively identified emergent themes in the counter-data maps in their contexts of production to examine the relation between socio-spatial data marginalisation and resistant data appropriation. We analysed emerging themes of spatiality and relationality with regard to counter-data mapping practices and imaginaries.

The first case study, Data for Black Lives, created the Covid Racial Data Tracker in early 2020 in the US context

under the Trump presidency during the rise of both populist white supremacy and the Black Lives Matter movement (Pleyers, 2020). Their initial data tracker consisted of data charts tracking the impact of Covid-19 in Black communities (Bowe et al., 2020; Data for Black Lives, 2020). This quantitative dataset was depicted visually and organised geographically by state, revealing disproportionate effects for Black people, providing evidence of how the pandemic amplified social inequalities, and calling for racial health justice (Moriarty et al., 2021).

The second case study, Indigenous Emergency, emerged in Brazil during Bolsonaro's right-wing government, which had sided with agribusiness, implementing hostile policies against Indigenous peoples. Indigenous groups in Brazil found that state-based Covid-19 case reporting in their territories drastically underrepresented the actual rates experienced and that public health measures were not culturally appropriate for Indigenous peoples. In response, the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples in Brazil (*Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil*, in Portuguese) founded Indigenous Emergency (*Emergência Indígena*), undertaking data collection and dissemination, including counter-data mapping, with the objective of producing trustworthy information on the effects of the pandemic on Indigenous communities in Brazil.

The third case study, CityLab maps, is a collection of personal maps of pandemic lockdown experiences, sourced via a global open invitation by urban data-mapping analysts at Bloomberg, US. They suggested that "making maps of your own world can amplify that experience because it asks you to sort out what you think, feel, see, hear, and even desire in a place" (Bliss & Martin, 2020). The qualitative maps shared on their website were accompanied by a narrative text, producing experiential data consisting of the material of everyday life. The CityLab maps can be understood as aggregate data, creating particular narratives with emergent themes illustrating similarities and differences in pandemic experiences across global locations and intersectional identities.

The projects were selected according to several criteria. First, they serve as alternatives to hegemonic Covid-19 data mapping, representing communities not readily visible in hegemonic maps. Second, they address the data poverty identified by Milan and Treré (2020) in lower-income countries and marginalised communities within higher-income countries. From a world-systems theory perspective (Sunkel, 1989), Data for Black Lives represents the racialized periphery within the metropole; Indigenous Emergency represents the colonised periphery within the periphery; and CityLab maps are situated in the metropole, with the maps representing diverse global subjectivities from both metropole and periphery. Third, we sought out projects with the objective of challenging power inequalities (Kidd, 2019). Fourth, collectively the projects should represent a range of intersectional subjectivities across race, gender, and global location, contesting these structures of

marginalisation. Finally, we aimed to include projects that appropriated both quantitative (Data for Black Lives, Indigenous Emergency) and qualitative (CityLab maps) data.

4. Findings

4.1. Resistant Data Appropriation

Our first research question interrogated resistant data appropriation by groups producing data maps that responded to their unique needs. Counter-data mappers tended to reappropriate data either by engaging in critical community-based analysis of hegemonic datasets or by collecting and organising their own subaltern datasets (Jeppesen, 2023, p. 127).

Data for Black Lives and Indigenous Emergency re-appropriated data to de-homogenise human geographies, revealing the persistence of racism and coloniality in Black communities in the US and Indigenous communities in Brazil, respectively. Data for Black Lives and Indigenous Emergency both used data, albeit in different formats, to carve out spaces for symbolically and geographically marginalised groups, illustrating how they were disproportionately affected by the global pandemic, and contesting health injustice through communicative mapping actions.

CityLab maps made visible the individual and the intimate through qualitative hyper-local counter-maps. The CityLab mapping project showed how constructed spatialities depicted shifts in daily routines during lockdown, reflecting on how these routines brought individuals into closer relations with nearby people, plants, animals, and ecosystems. These spatialized relations extended to the virtual. Qualitative resistant data appropriations took the material of everyday life as their subaltern datasets, foregrounding affective and relational structures of liberation to counter hegemonic mappings of social control.

The appropriation of qualitative and quantitative data to produce counter-maps followed principles of community communication. The maps connected collective identities to resistant spatial data appropriations, expressing shared interests. Moreover, they were created and circulated through empowering relations of mutuality, directly and indirectly contesting pandemic conditions of isolation and marginality (Peruzzo, 2008). The resistant counter-map spatialities contested the hegemonic spatialities of contagion, engaging data to prioritise human spatial-relationalities.

The case studies advanced spatial-relational narratives by mapping material elements connected to living spaces and experiences, reconstructing the relational ways in which the pandemic had affected individuals in communities, and expressing strong connections among communities, data, and spaces. This differs from hegemonic mapping, where the data focused on crisis points of contagion and death. Relationality in counter-data

mapping is created through collectively resistant data appropriation in the communicative action of “making” a territory (Santos, 2021). Relational counter-data mapping practices may thus be understood as citizen-centred technologies and actions, appropriating data to spatially visualise and visibilise communities.

4.2. Cartographies of Resistance

Our second research question examined the use of counter-data mapping to visualise marginalised communities during the pandemic. We observed the emergence of new counter-mapping practices we call cartographies of resistance. The three case studies were quick to realise that hegemonic maps fell short of providing valuable information for marginalised groups, such as differentiated contagion among Indigenous populations in Brazil and Black populations in the US (Figures 1 and 2), and more individualised relations between those confined in lockdown and their lived spaces (Figure 3). Using datasets to reconstruct geographies, the communities strengthened and rendered visible their relationships to their lived spaces and territories. They engaged in space-making practices that disrupted exclusionary cartographies marked by coloniality that represent populations as homogenous inhabitants of nations and regions (Mignolo, 2007), instead differentiating their own communities either by expressing particular community needs and demands (in the case of Indigenous and Black communities) or intimate relations within lived spaces (in the case of CityLab maps). These findings strengthen Kidd’s (2019, p. 955) argument that coloniality has been disrupted through activist mapping, as “Indigenous first nations have employed counter-mapping as part of a complex repertoire of resistance.” Such repertoires of resistance link counter-mapping to social movement actions, further supporting our argument that counter-data mapping is the new frontier of media activism and community communication.

Counter-mapping practices have revealed invisibilised, racialised, gendered, and Indigenous communities, linking lived space to marginalised identities, and consequently have challenged hegemonic maps that construct feelings of alarm, alienation, and social control. These practices also contest the erasure of particular challenges faced by communities, such as the threat of contact with outsiders in the case of Indigenous groups, and the racialisation of access to healthcare and housing in the case of Black populations in the US. In hegemonic Covid-19 maps, on one hand, interpersonal relationality was largely erased or figured only as communication of disease, sowing fear of potentially infected “others,” rather than communicating the possibility of finding common ground, sharing experiences, and supporting one another. Counter-data maps, on the other hand, allowed for relational communicative action, as the three counter-mapping projects constructed relationality through mapping private, public, and commu-


nity information, relations, spaces, and territories not visible in hegemonic data maps. In so doing, they created cartographies of resistance against the homogenisation of data that had erased the empirical specificities of intersectional communities at the margins. Through the practice of representing themselves in data and maps, Indigenous groups, Black communities, and locked-down individuals constructed themselves as collective communities occupying physical spaces and reconstructing self-representations. Relating to Santos’ (2021) conceptualization of the interplay between systems of objects and systems of actions, these marginalised communities and individuals have resisted the technological and normative order imposed by hegemonic data and maps—by engaging in symbolic action, creating resistant datasets, and cartographically representing their own communities and territories.

The three case studies were explicitly created to produce qualitative and quantitative data visualisations that represented lived spaces, territories, and health impacts during the pandemic through the lens of marginalised communities and isolated individuals, contesting both marginalisation and isolation through counter-data visualisations. Moreover, the visualisations constructed new social realities through counter-data mapping, calling for state and corporate accountability around intersectional health justice (Brower, 2021; Moriarty et al., 2021).

4.3. Spatial-Relational Counter-Data Mapping Imaginaries

Our third and final question explored counter-data mapping imaginaries. The predominant data mapping imaginary that emerged in all three case studies was a spatial-relational imaginary that revealed and revalued community relationships. In this section, we analyse the contributions of counter-data mapping practices and imaginaries to a new frontier of alternative digital media activism and community communication.

The Data for Black Lives counter-data chart (Figure 1) is a data visualisation (not a map in the traditional sense) that visualises relationships between Black and non-Black people with respect to death rates during Covid-19, enumerated geographically state by state. Black communities have long used counter-data mapping to demarcate community spaces and call for change, harkening back to the civil rights movement when mapping focused on racist policing (Alderman et al., 2021). Spatiality in the Data for Black Lives counter-data visualisation was expressed on the state level, with relationality being expressed through a colour scheme that includes white, green, red, and grey. Red highlights states wherein the percentage of reported Covid-19 cases and deaths for Black people exceeded the percentage of Black people in the total US population. Green highlights states where the reverse was true. White highlights states indicating no statistically significant difference. Grey highlights missing or unreported data.



State	Total positive cases in state	Total deaths in state	Percentage of Black people represented in total cases	Percentage of Black people represented in total deaths	Percentage of total population that identify as Black (census)
Alaska	1479	17	2.39%	0	3.8
Alabama	53587	1121	31.04%	42.73%	26.8
Arkansas	28367	321	21.27%	24.30%	15.7
American Samoa	0	0	0	0	0
Arizona	122467	2237	2.19%	2.86%	5.1
California	320804	7017	2.79%	8.74%	6.5
Colorado	36913	1586	4.68%	6.75%	4.6
Connecticut	47287	4348	13.17%	14.86%	12
District of Columbia	10847	568	49.26%	74.12%	46.4
Delaware	12804	517	25.54%	25.53%	23
Florida	269811	4346	14.17%	19.88%	16.9
Georgia	116926	3001	26.20%	46.35%	32.4
Guam	312	5	0	0	0
Hawaii	1220	19	0.77%	0	2.2
Iowa	35712	750	8.82%	4.80%	4
Idaho	10902	102	1.33%	0.98%	0.9
Illinois	155048	7388	16.68%	26.94%	14.6
Indiana	51612	2760	11.82%	13.41%	9.8
Kansas	18611	284	7.57%	21.48%	6.1
Kentucky	19389	625	8.96%	14.08%	8.4
Louisiana	78122	3416	0	48.92%	32.7

Figure 1. Excerpt of data visualisation titled “Percentage of Black people represented in total deaths per state.” Source: Data for Black Lives (2020).

The statistics quantifying the state-by-state proportion of Black populations more generally served not just to visualise disparate health outcomes but also to make visible the size of Black communities in the US, a spatial-relational representation of existing Black communities.

With red-highlighted states representing a higher proportion than green ones, this quantitative counter-data visualisation renders visible the pandemic amplification of systemic racial inequalities in healthcare delivery. It also suggests that negative outcomes and systemic health racism are not inevitable because a significant number of states had equitable impacts or, relatively speaking, more positive outcomes for Black people.

The counter-data mapping imaginary of Data for Black Lives may thus be characterised as one of Black visibility, with concomitant calls for Black health justice, consistent with the political, intersectional objectives of the Black Lives Matter movement. Further, this may be understood as a key social imaginary constructing a new mode of media activism in the early days of the pandemic lockdown when Black Lives Matter street protests had nearly ground to a halt (Pleyers, 2020).

Indigenous Emergency also aimed to render local communities visible. Through an anti-colonial imaginary, Indigenous Emergency challenged the logic of coloniality by creating Indigenous-owned counter-datasets and counter-maps. Quantitative geospatial maps created by the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples in Brazil collective were constructed using community-developed datasets to address an identified data gap regarding Indigenous Covid-19 cases and death reporting.

The maps revealed inter-Indigenous relations and relations with non-Indigenous populations. In one example, data from the meat-packing industry (Figure 2) revealed how the spread of Covid-19 was amplified through a local workplace, as Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers interacted. Due to inadequate Covid-19 protocols, this meat-packing plant had an outbreak that deeply impacted the surrounding Indigenous communities (Foscaches & Klein, 2020). Overlaying several counter-data maps, Indigenous Emergency highlighted the fact that the meat-packing corporations were not doing their due diligence to protect employees, including Indigenous peoples, which drove up infections in Indigenous territories.

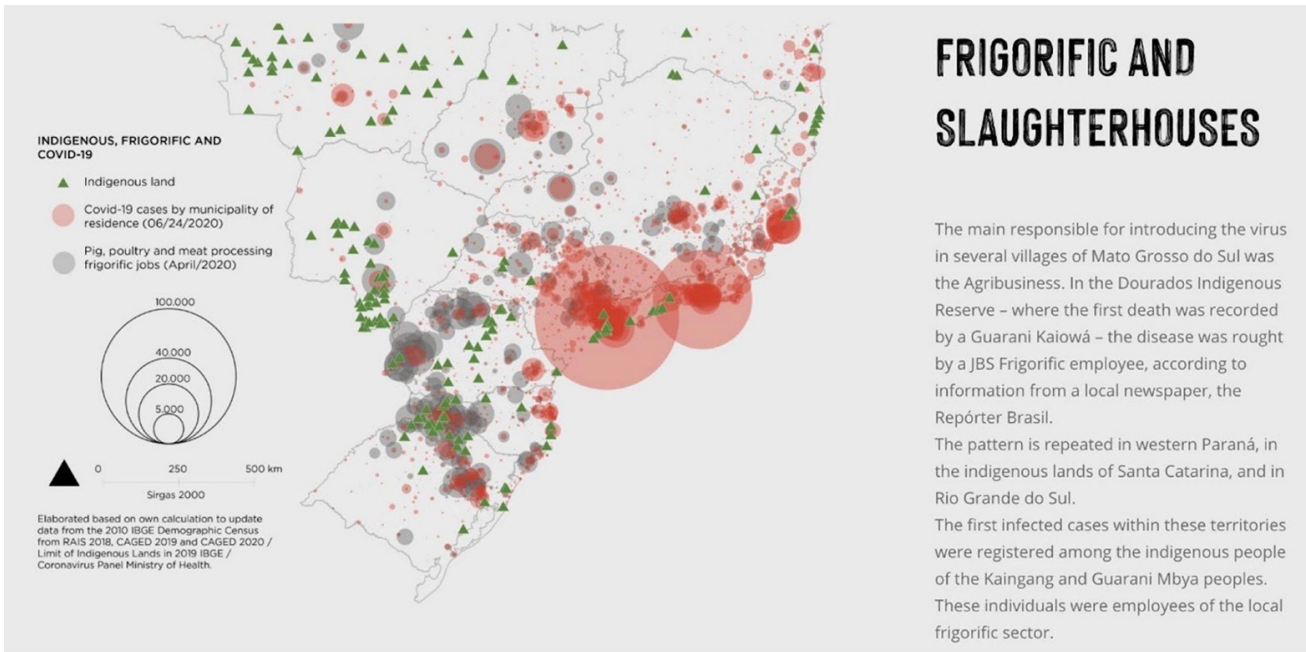


Figure 2. Frigorific and slaughterhouses. Source: Emergência Indígena (2020).

In another map (not shown here), Indigenous Emergency illustrated the relationship between Indigenous peoples and state health workers travelling to remote communities, revealing them as the origin of outbreaks in four different Indigenous territories (Farias, 2020).

The counter-data mapping practices of Indigenous Emergency highlighted relationality and called for inter-sectional accountability from the reciprocally supporting local state (public health workers) and capitalist (meat-packing plant) institutions. Their data visualisations demonstrated how state and corporate neglect inter-acted to reproduce coloniality, amplifying Indigenous health and death outcomes.

The CityLab maps were primarily concerned with spatial self-expression within the home and community, including relations to other people, pets, outdoor spaces, birds and animals, neighbours and neighbourhoods, and virtual spaces, all constitutive elements of the communities depicted (Figure 3).

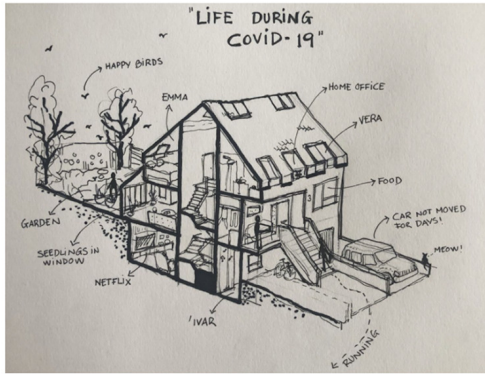
The spatial-relational data-mapping imaginary in the CityLab maps project, exemplified here by Edda Ívarsdóttir’s map (Figure 3), can be conceptualised as several concentric circles of spatial relationships (Figure 4) starting with the relation to self, moving outward toward relations with the space of the home (other residents are named: Ivar, Emma, Vera), including people, pets, and plants, both indoors and outdoors. The representation moves outward toward spatial relations to neighbours in proximity, and those neighbours’ plants and pets, then to spatial aspects of the neighbourhood, which included limited access to grocery stores (here indicated by “food” in the kitchen) and pharmacies, then outward again to circumscribed but pleasurable acts such as walking in the

streets and green spaces such as parks (in Figure 3 hinted at by “car not moved for days”).

At the same time, many of the CityLab maps also depicted boundaries, prohibited spaces, and nostalgic spaces and relations no longer being engaged. Virtual spatial relationality was the outermost circle of spatial relations, extending beyond the circumscribed boundaries in the physical world, often including those prohibited from travelling and thus only seen on-screen.

The three counter-data mapping imaginaries of this multi-case study are depicted comparatively in a data visualisation (Figure 4), with Data for Black Lives socially constructing Black visibility and calls for health justice, Indigenous Emergency socially constructing inter-sectional anti-colonial and anti-state action, and CityLab maps socially constructing self-expression, interrupting the hegemonic isolation narrative to replace it with one of relationality and interaction.

Counter-data mapping practices emerged as concrete manifestations of the conceptual development of counter-data mapping imaginaries, as inferred through the data appropriations and representations analysed. Data for Black Lives in the US collected data organised by race to illustrate racial inequalities, make Black communities visible, and advocate for health justice. Indigenous Emergency in Brazil reappropriated big datasets and generated more accurate Covid-19 datasets, which were then used to both visualise and visibilise their communities. CityLab maps, while both more hyper-local per map and more global in aggregate, re-imagined how the creation of maps allowed for self-expression during times of isolation, encouraging mapmakers to engage with their feelings, and foregrounding relational experiences in person and virtually.



Edda Ívarsdóttir Iceland

Category: Domestic rearrangements
4/5/2020

My map shows my house. After spending weeks staying at home working and learning there, it's like our world has shrunk into it. Only leaving for running and occasional shopping. The city seems so quiet and tranquil, the birds and the cats seem to like it. All the cars are parked in the driveways, which is a nice change.

We live close by a busy street and we feel there is a big difference in noise during rush hours. We see people going out more for biking and running than before. It's overall a positive change. I hope we don't go back to the way it was before, at least not all the way.

Figure 3. CityLab map produced by Edda Ivarsdottir, Iceland. Source: Bliss and Martin (2020).

All three projects have continued to develop their counter-mapping projects, expanding beyond the maps studied in this multi-case study, indicating their continued relevance to our understanding of counter-data mapping, and suggesting a subsequent study; however, that is beyond the scope of this situated analysis.

5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

During the emergent Covid-19 pandemic, big data was used by global power centres, including states and corporations, to create hegemonic representations emphasising disease and social control. In this context, we find that marginalised communities have been resisting state and commercial control of big data through resistant data appropriation and counter-hegemonic cartographic representations. Through counter-mapping Covid-19 data, they have challenged datafication on an intersectional level across social class, race, Indigeneity, gender, and global location. These counter-data mapping practices and imaginaries constitute a participatory communication process, as theorised in the field of

community communication, wherein communities may express demands for justice through appropriation, production, analysis, and visualisation of data. We argue that counter-data mapping comprises a data justice practice and has become a key form of alternative digital media activism and community communication in the 2020s, a practice we characterise as cartographies of resistance.

Analysing a comparative, multi-case study featuring cartographies of resistance, we have identified four key practices present in all three case studies: the creation of counter-narratives, the implementation of collective action, the insistence on community data ownership, and the engagement in community self-production. These four practices, we argue, are consistent with practices of alternative digital media activism and community communication.

First, spatial-relational counter-data practices were used in the case studies to provide counter-narratives as a form of self-representation by individuals, groups, and communities. These narratives function as a denunciation of the systems of fear and control created by

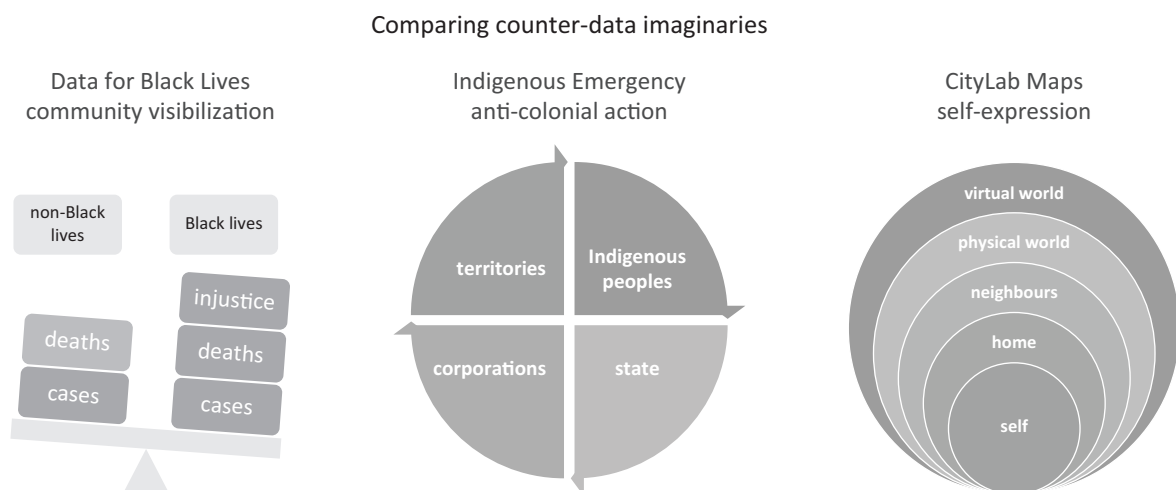


Figure 4. Comparing counter-data mapping imaginaries across the multi-case study.

hegemonic Covid-19 maps, and in their place, develop more authentic narratives about the everyday lives of individuals and communities, rendering local communities visible, literally putting them on the map. Practices of self-representation and providing a voice for the voiceless have long been understood as key strategies in alternative media activism and community communication (Downing, 2000; Rodríguez, 2017).

Second, alternative and community media provide an avenue for collective civic action (Bailey et al., 2008), a role also played by counter-data mapping projects. During the pandemic, counter-data mapping practices had collective action as an objective. As such, they worked at the grassroots to contest the neoliberal top-down management of the pandemic through mechanisms such as increasing state social control, rising corporate profits in the health sector driven by privatised vaccinations, and the intensification of datafication in big tech social media platforms. Collaborative mapping practices were articulated in circumstances of limited social contact, promoting collective well-being and empowerment through mutual aid, key practices and imaginaries in media activism and community communication.

Third, digital and community media activism forms that include data justice and smart cities advocacy have focused on the importance of community data ownership (Boeing, 2021; Dencik et al., 2019). Counter-mapping resistant data appropriation practices similarly exercise collective ownership over data employed for the benefit of counter-mapped communities and territories. Through spatial-relational counter-data mapping imaginaries, the communities we studied were able to reappropriate ownership and control over their personal and collective data, developing digital technologies of the (collective) self for liberatory rather than oppressive purposes, consistent with media activism and community communication practices and imaginaries.

Finally, the communities we studied fostered community self-production in two crucial ways. First, their counter-data mapping self-representation practices created spatial-relational reflections through decentralised and distributive dynamics that relied on collaboration within and across communities producing the community in data and maps. Second, the production processes were collectively organised through mutual aid and solidarity practices, through collaborations and knowledge sharing that were either face-to-face or digitally facilitated. Thus, communities self-organised to produce counter-data maps, simultaneously producing themselves as communities. This dual community self-production process has been well documented in the media activism community communication literature (Jeppesen, 2021).

Counter-data mapping practices, according to these four dimensions of analysis, therefore, tend to follow the logic and practices of digital media activism and community communication (Downing, 2000; Jeppesen, 2021; Paiva, 2005; Peruzzo, 2014; Rodríguez, 2017). Communities engaged in counter-data mapping both

reveal and construct counter-hegemonic social and data-mapping imaginaries. Reproducing the collective dynamics of self-representation seen within community media (Peruzzo, 2008), counter-mapping projects have thus brought into focus the “politics of who or what is and is not represented in the standard datasets” (Bowe et al., 2020, p. 10), while simultaneously foregrounding the malleability of data maps through counter-data actions against platform datafication and data coloniality (Meng & DiSalvo, 2018).

Data justice scholar Milan (2017) has argued that data activism is a new frontier of media activism. Following Milan, taking a communications approach to data and mapping, we have revealed how counter-data mapping intervenes in the field of geography, introducing a geospatial understanding of data activism while integrating map-based data visualisations into our understanding of data justice, digital media activism, and community communication practices. We therefore argue that counter-data mapping is the new frontier of media activism and community communication, with the potential to become an important communicative form of resistance in the 21st century.

Although there may be both continuities and divergences between counter-hegemonic media and counter-hegemonic mapping, counter-data mapping initiatives unveil disparities in access to technologies and the sociotechnical capacities to use them. Digital access is conditioned by social class and often impacted by racialized, gendered, and colonial structures of oppression. Digital divides mean that diverse groups have differential access, not just to digital devices, but also to mapping technologies, social capacities, and the skills, time, knowledge, training, and opportunities to use these advanced geospatial techniques. Moreover, instead of bridging digital divides, technologies often place marginalised groups under surveillance through processes of discipline, capture, and social control, further perpetuating their marginalisation and exclusion, and potentially putting their very lives at risk (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; van Dijck, 2014). Consequently, counter-data mapping addresses not just technological but also social practices of community map-making which can be understood as digital media activism. Counter-data mapping thus shapes new sociotechnical opportunities through further developing the resistant data-mapping imaginaries that have shaped the Covid-19 counter-data mapping practices of the three projects studied. Part and parcel in this are the ways in which participants have created resistant social meanings and imaginaries regarding the communities, spaces, and relationships they live in, move through, and engage with daily.

Finally, this study highlights how data and digitised maps have been collectively appropriated by marginalised groups as a form of counter-hegemonic spatial-relational representation that can be analytically accounted for as a communicative process. Further, it reveals how the complex crossroads between territories

and spaces, human and non-human life, and subaltern datasets and big data can be a terrain of struggle for communication rights.

After the Covid-19 pandemic is over, while crises caused by capitalism's contradictions continue to affect many marginalised communities, the collective capacity and skills to appropriate data to represent, visualise, visibilise, and understand the spatial-relationality of marginalised communities through counter-data mapping will be an important feature of collective political participation, resistance, and social change for the future.

Acknowledgments

This article draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (File No. 430–2021–00835). The authors would like to thank iowyth hezel ulthiin for proofreading the manuscript.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Representing Life and Death in Care Institutions: Between Invisible Victims and Suffering Old Women

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Submitted: 30 July 2022 | Accepted: 16 November 2022 | Published: 28 February 2023

Abstract

The article examines the representation and (in)visibility of ageing people in German care institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Within the framework of a qualitative content-analytical and discourse-analytical study of 185 articles, including 108 images from German newspapers, the authors trace the patterns behind the representation of ageing people. In so doing, they argue that in the media discourse ageing people are often represented without agency and in a strongly homogenised way as “others.” By emphasising pre-existing conditions and vulnerability, older and disabled people appear naturally at risk. The article also problematises the mere counting of life and death in care institutions, which contributes to a naturalisation and symbolic annihilation of the death of ageing people. Furthermore, the authors identify the notion of the suffering old woman as a key figure in pandemic media discourse, performing a critical function. She embodies an appeal to society to show sympathy and solidarity and to act reasonably with respect to the pandemic measures yet contains no elements of discursive agency or personal characteristics beyond that. Additionally, the suffering old woman reinforces traditional patterns of patriarchal representation. The authors conclude that the pandemic has placed the German care crisis in settings of institutionalised geriatric care into the media spotlight. However, the comprehensive inclusion of ageing people has been absent. Emphasising one’s own ability and thus adapting to the midlife years seems to be the only way to precarious inclusion for ageing people in the discourse.

Keywords

ageing; agency; Covid-19; German newspapers; institutionalised care; media representation; vulnerability

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps” edited by Margreth Lünenborg (Freie Universität Berlin), Miriam Siemon (Freie Universität Berlin), and Wolfgang Reißmann (Freie Universität Berlin).

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is the latest crisis to highlight the harsh structural inequalities that exist in societies. Just like “HIV/AIDS, hypertension, poverty, diabetes, climate change disasters, unemployment [or] mass incarceration,” Covid-19 has once again reminded the world that “we are *not* all in this together” (Bowleg, 2020, p. 917, emphasis added). Inequalities that structure the degree of vulnerability to a given crisis are exposed and highlighted as if through a “burning glass” (Graefe et al.,

2020, p. 431) as the crisis unfolds. The worsening of the already acute care crisis in Germany and many other countries during the pandemic has drawn (media) attention to the struggle of old and disabled people who live at the mercy of the structures and conditions of the nursing home (Navarro, 2020, p. 272). The risk of infection as well as the possibility of shaping one’s life according to one’s own ideas are thus dramatically dependent on the quality of the residence and staff (Hawranek et al., 2021).

However, long-term geriatric care has already become increasingly troublesome in the last few

decades, marked by a severe shortage in guaranteed investment. Staff shortages in the years after 2000 have steadily worsened due to the neoliberalisation and privatisation of nursing homes. Chronic underfunding and the marginalisation of the issue in the media are key characteristics of the care crisis (McGregor, 2001, p. 83). The marginalisation and symbolic annihilation of care-dependent ageing people in settings of institutionalised care not only reveal the consequences but also the operating principles of the undermining of the welfare state by neoliberal politics and market-oriented logic (Lolich, 2019; Tremain, 2020). The already marginal attention given to the care crisis and the miserable working conditions of nurses is only trumped by the structural neglect and violence towards ageing people in need of care. For years, there have been repeated reports about critical conditions in nursing homes in the media—so-called nursing scandals (Fussek & Schober, 2009, p. 13). These scandals are instances of visibility, yet the flood of reporting is repeatedly followed by the ebb of silence.

The pandemic emerged against this backdrop, creating new challenges and exacerbating existing ones (Albert et al., 2022, p. 36; Hebblethwaite et al., 2021, p. 171). The *Care Report 2021* indicates that the mortality of nursing home residents in Germany increased dramatically at the beginning of the pandemic (Kohl et al., 2021, p. 9). In the wake of these events, and due to the perception that ageing people were categorically vulnerable, stringent restrictions were placed on nursing home residents. The pandemic was marked by a ban on visits, a ban on medical or any other out-of-home treatment, restriction of movement, and isolation (Albert et al., 2022, p. 40). Coupled with many devastating Covid-19 outbreaks in nursing homes and the “new” visibility of old failings, the issue of geriatric care and the situation of ageing people in nursing homes became a perennial topic. Thus, the pandemic not only shone a spotlight on current inadequacies but also on the existing, pre-pandemic deficiencies in care institutions. From this point of view, the pandemic can be understood as a crisis within a crisis (Albert et al., 2022, p. 36).

Therefore, this article investigates how care-dependent, ageing people in settings of institutionalised care are represented in the German media discourse during the pandemic. Which ageing people are portrayed in what ways and along which axes of intersectional inequalities are these representations structured? What value is ascribed to the lives and deaths of ageing people in this discourse? These questions set the general framework for this article.

2. The Neoliberalisation of Age(ing) and the Role of the Media

Recent decades have seen the restructuring of the welfare state, neoliberal transformation, and privatisation take place throughout Europe. Tasks that were once the responsibility of the state have become pri-

vatised responsibilities and individual risks (Sakellariou & Rotarou, 2017, p. 3). This process can be traced to the pre-pandemic discovery of ageing people as consumers and brand ambassadors. Instead of being portrayed as feeble and withdrawn, older people were rebranded as active, consumerist, modern, healthy, and able in the media, science, politics, and the economy. In this way, a part of the ageing population was successfully incorporated into the neoliberal discourse of productivity and youthfulness and thus won over by the market (Rozanova, 2010, p. 220). In this process of the neoliberal normalisation of ageing bodies (Rudman, 2015, pp. 11–12), ageing people were divided into two categories: The first of these is the *third age*, which includes the so-called “young old,” meaning all those who conform to the norm of productive youthfulness (Thiele et al., 2013). This group of successfully ageing people has become increasingly visible and celebrated in the media for its abilities (Rozanova, 2010, pp. 214–215). At the same time, the negative stereotypes were shifted to the *fourth age*. This phase of chronic illness, disability, and care dependency becomes legible through the lens of disability studies and its rich insights into the socio-cultural construction of (dis)ability, helping to delineate the processes of *symbolic annihilation* (Tuchman, 1978). These ageing people belonging to the fourth age are discursively constructed as helpless, needy, old-fashioned, unproductive, burdensome, and disabled. They are “the other” to the “good”—that is, youthfulness and ableness (Gibbons, 2016, p. 78). Thus, they remain invisible and politically irrelevant, pushed to the margins of the discourse (Adlung & Backes, 2021, pp. 79–81). Gender also plays a key role in the representation of age, as well as disability, and while there is extensive research on gendered representations of the third age, the fourth age can be considered a desideratum (Adlung & Backes, 2021, p. 82).

Drawing on cultural studies, we consider the public sphere to be a powerful place for the construction of social meaning. In this sense, Klaus and Lünenborg (2012, p. 204) regard “media as a particular form of cultural production” and “an engine and an actor in the processes of self-making and being-made, in which people acquire their individual, group-specific and social identities.” Journalism plays a crucial role in the media as a “discursive authority” (Allan & Zelizer, 2004, p. 5), with both the power to reproduce unequal social positions and to unveil and criticise them. The pandemic presents a special context for the production of inequality as it created a situation in which far-reaching state-ordered restrictions became necessary, and, in liberal democracies, such actions must be legitimised through public negotiation. In this context, the model of cultural citizenship as “an essential dimension of citizenship in media society” developed by Klaus and Lünenborg (2012, p. 204) can help analyse processes of inclusion (into a journalistically imagined we-group) and exclusion (as others) by and through the media. Cultural citizenship “unfolds under

the conditions of unequal power relations” and further “entails all those cultural practices that allow competent participation in society and includes the rights to be represented and to speak actively” (Klaus & Lünenborg, 2012, p. 204). The allocation of cultural citizenship is particularly interesting when it comes to the fourth age, as the state of research suggests comprehensive symbolic annihilation here (Adlung & Backes, 2021). Following this perspective, we pose the following question: Where and when are ageing people included in the journalistic we-group, and where do they appear as others or remain invisible altogether?

3. Method

In order to investigate this question this study has employed a combination of content and discourse analysis. The material was systemised using content analysis by means of closed categories. The discourse analysis then allowed for a more in-depth examination of selected aspects. The articles were excavated from popular German daily and weekly print newspapers. Based on the selected sample the entire political spectrum was considered, including both information-oriented newspapers and entertainment-oriented tabloids. Differences between the two are only presented as they occur. *Bild*, the most widely read newspaper in the country, and its Sunday edition, *Bild am Sonntag*, were categorised as tabloids, while *Die Tageszeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* were classified as information-oriented broadsheets covering a spectrum from liberal-left to centre-right. The selected tabloids and broadsheets together comprise a corpus of material that reflects German newspapers with nationwide distribution and a high level of impact.

Our analysis and discussion of the sampled data will delve into the liminal spaces between living, dying, and death, between health and disease, between seemingly productive and seemingly burdensome parts of society, and between autonomy and dependency. Because the nursing home is the intersection where age and disability are institutionalised, it constitutes the pivotal focal point of the study. The context of the pandemic is crucial for the analysis, as several fatal Covid-19 outbreaks occurred in German care facilities during the selected sample period, which have contributed to increased coverage in the media. Thus, our study examines two waves of the pandemic, from March 1 to April 30, 2020, and from November 1 to December 31, 2020. Using the keywords “nursing home” (“Altenheim” and “Pflegeheim”) and “Corona,” this study sampled 185 articles.

The collected data was systematised through closed coding using deductive categories (Mayring, 2015), for example, to distinguish between topic-oriented and subject-oriented articles. Through open coding, the study then identified designations for ageing people, speaking positions, and metaphors in headings. To deter-

mine the agency of old people in the articles, different categories were clustered into agency types. The schematic determination was helpful to select subject-oriented articles for a more profound analysis. Therefore, discourse analysis was employed following predefined dimensions such as portrayals of ageing people (Keller, 2006). The objective was to explore the subject-oriented articles in depth and to investigate linguistic moments of othering or inclusion. Furthermore, the linguistic layer was dissected regarding the word fields and metaphors utilised in the discourse.

In addition, 108 images that illustrate the discourse in the sample were analysed. An analytical approach to image types by Grittmann and Ammann (2011) was applied, which is an extension of the iconographic–iconological approach (Müller, 2011). This analysis asks for the situational context of visual representation and seeks to sort the material according to types of (political) coverage. As we discuss the results of the visual analysis in greater detail elsewhere (Adlung & Backes, in press), the present article will only briefly mention them.

4. Results

In this section, we will present selected results dealing with the language, agency, and portrayal attributed to ageing people in the discourse under study. Broadly speaking, the sample includes both brief and in-depth accounts of the lives and deaths of ageing people in care institutions during the pandemic. However, primary reasons for reporting include instances of infection with Covid-19 in care facilities and the process of vaccinating vulnerable groups. In this context, some articles focus on specific ageing people, while others only report on “the elderly” in general. Above all, the inadequate preparedness for a severe pandemic situation (lack of protective clothing, poorly equipped public health offices, hospitals, and care facilities, especially in the first phase of the investigation), but also curfews and bans on visitors (especially in the second phase of the investigation) take centre stage in the reporting. Particularly in the tabloid press, the forced separation of family members due to those bans is frequently emphasised as a major issue.

4.1. Metaphors of Nature and War

In the analysis of metaphors used in the articles, the study finds that the rhetorical image of war and crisis is dominant, creating an apocalyptic atmosphere. While retirement homes turn into “time bombs” (Rößler, 2020, p. 3; all quotes from newspaper articles were translated by authors), “the Second World War,” “the fear in the air-raid shelter,” and Covid-19 infections in settings of institutionalised care are presented as having the same level of severity (Kittan, 2020, p. 9). The tabloids create neologisms such as “home-of-death,” “fever-fear” (Ringleben et al., 2020, p. 7), or “Covid-19-catastrophe” (Piatov, 2020, p. 2), speak of a struggle for life and

death (Rákóczy, 2020, p. 10), and use the metaphor of “a bomb falling on a nursing home each day” (Reichelt, 2020, p. 2). Covid-19 appears as a sort of force of nature, equated with “a hurricane” (Davis, 2020, p. 11). These kinds of metaphors make infections of ageing people in care seem like unstoppable natural disasters. Thus, death becomes fate, and the structural conditions of infections and vulnerabilities are pushed to the margins of visibility.

4.2. Agency of Ageing People

Ageing people are represented in the sample either with (a) no agency in a quantifying and victimising, topic-oriented way, (b) with low agency, or (c) with high agency as central actors and narrators of the events.

The first and dominant type is comprised of articles in which no ageing person is directly part of the representation—That is, “the elderly” are described in a homogenising fashion as a uniform risk group and no other identity or character traits (such as gender, education, or sense of humour) are addressed apart from life in a care facility. In purely quantitative terms, this type makes up 66% of the sample, i.e., all those articles are topic oriented. Ageing people are quantified and victimised in this type. The mere counting of deaths in nursing homes stood out unmistakably. Some of the articles consist exclusively of a string of one to three sentences, finding their climax in the counting of the dead as if in a spectacle. Numerous examples of such quantification can be found in the headlines. As in a sports competition, a score is updated: “Already 24 dead in a retirement home” (“Schon 24 tote in seniorenheim,” 2020, p. 9), followed by a headline one day later “already 27 dead residents” (“Jetzt schon 27 tote bewohner,” 2020, p. 9). Moreover, the analysis of the image types reveals two recurring image types, mainly illustrating articles in which old people have no agency. The two motifs are evacuated nursing homes and isolated ageing people. In both cases, it is predominantly ageing women who are represented. In the articles of this agency type, old people are not described in their gender but, in the images, they are represented as feminine. Repeatedly, it is the ageing woman who is being rescued or who suffers from loneliness in these images.

The second type concerns the representation of ageing people with low agency. This describes 26% of the total sample and is to be found in the subject-oriented articles, which make up 34% of the sample and contain some form of depictions of ageing people. While at least one representation of a particular ageing person occurs in this second type of low agency, the person only plays a minor role and speaking positions are rarely to be found. The representation is used to portray a complex topic on a personal level. Often it is the relative’s perspective that is spotlighted, while the affected person is only mentioned by name. The ageing people represented in this type are predominantly women (67%), whereas ageing men are less frequently featured (33%).

This is also reflected by the 108 images accompanying the articles: 77 of the ageing people depicted are ageing women and a mere 27 are ageing men (in some depictions the respective sex is not indicated). Thus, the agency of the represented ageing person is low in this type of reporting, even though they are named and sometimes even pictured.

The third type, representing a high level of agency of ageing people, is apparent in only 8% of the total sample and again exclusively in subject-oriented articles. Here, the ageing persons are the main protagonists of the article. They are addressed by name and are given central speaking positions, serving as role models in dealing with the pandemic. Usually foregrounded in this type is the (mental or physical) ability of the ageing person. This happens, for example, when the capabilities of the person are highlighted, distinguishing them from other ageing people. The tabloids do this often, recurrently reporting on heroes and heroines of the crisis. For example, the 94-year-old Ingeborg Körner is described as “sitting at the sewing machine every day” to produce masks and is celebrated for it (Lochte & Sievering, 2020, p. 9). In this portrayal of high agency, ageing people are active and independent, and the article primarily represents their perspective. Compared to the ratio of masculine and feminine representations in the entire sample (2:1), men are more frequently represented here with a ratio of 1.45 women to one man. When old people appear in articles with low or high agency, it is more likely that the article will be accompanied by a portrait, and the face portrayed is more likely to be feminine. However, when they are depicted in their past as younger adults or in their (former) careers, men predominate.

Thus, ageing people, and perhaps counterintuitively ageing women, do become visible in the discourse analysed by the study, yet very few articles are truly centred on older people as individuals with their own perspectives and offer them the opportunity to speak for themselves. These initial insights demonstrate the pandemic as a moment of visibility for ageing people in care who normally receive little media attention. How this new visibility is structured and what meaning the predominant representation of women in the discourse, speaking in quantitative terms, could also have for their representation in qualitative terms will be the subject of the following section.

4.3. Attributes of Ageing People

Utilising discourse analysis, we found five dominant patterns of representation. Those presented here are the recurring ones (for more details, see Adlung & Backes, in press).

The first pattern concerns the representation of ageing persons as being lonely. For example, the article “Is There Anyone?” (Maestro, 2020, p. 53) begins with the sentence, “loneliness is the most difficult thing for many people living in nursing homes.” Yet the article

emphasises that this loneliness is not simply due to the current crisis but is inherently rooted in old age. “The long-time friends are missing. Many are dead. The children must work, the grandchildren prefer to meet their friends” (Maestro, 2020, p. 53). Loneliness is portrayed as the primary issue of almost every ageing person in many articles analysed. The connection between solitude and old age, however, can be observed in discourse even before the pandemic. As previous studies have shown, loneliness appears “as an inevitable part of old age” (Uotila et al., 2010, p. 116; see also Agren, 2017).

Secondly, a pattern emphasising vulnerability can be observed in many articles. Ageing people are portrayed as “the most vulnerable” (Ludwig, 2020, p. 1) and “the weakest” (Hellwig, 2020, p. 13). Marked as a “high-risk group” (Gertz, 2020, p. 3), they are depicted and described in a constant state of worry (Przybilla, 2020, p. 27). For instance, a resident is quoted saying that she is “in fear for her life” (“Schon 10 corona-opfer,” 2020, p. 6). Likewise, the management and the nursing staff are portrayed in their concern for the residents, again emphasising the latter’s alleged vulnerability: “The nurses and the directors of the home are afraid that the virus will enter the retirement home. For the old and most often frail residents would be exposed to it almost unprotected” (Jaeger, 2020, p. 3).

Thirdly, ageing people are represented as grateful. Some of them are quoted as giving thanks to care home staff: “They do superhumanly good work” (Völkerling, 2020, p. 6). If people try to liven up, entertain, or distract ageing people, they are portrayed as “the heroes of the elderly” (Ackermann, 2020, p. 14). Repeatedly, people are depicted playing music in front of nursing homes to cheer up the supposedly lonely residents. Kindness and solidarity are highlighted, and old people appear as grateful, humble, and selfless. For example, an accordion player states, “I’m here because I feel I can make the elderly feel cheerful and happy,” while one resident comments, “This is a really nice moment of light. I’m thrilled. When I heard his bell, I thought the ice cream man was coming” (Ackermann, 2020, p. 14).

Fourthly, ageing people are represented as being insane or confused. They are pathologised through an infantilising language; for example, one article describes care home residents as making “big eyes” (Drügemöller, 2020, p. 54), language usually reserved for awe-struck children. Dementia insinuates incapacitation, as can be seen in this quote: “Our residents don’t know what’s happening to them” (Conti, 2020, p. 4). In this way, the implementation of measures which go against the will of ageing people is justified through the infantilisation and incapacitation of people in need of care. In addition, being old and being confused or insane are strongly naturalised and constructed as inherently interconnected in the discourse. At times, the portrayal of older people is even disrespectful, for example in an article describing a woman staring at a bottle of body lotion as if it is “a wine of a good vintage” (Knobloch, 2020, p. 3).

Lastly, we found a recurring pattern of heteronormative portrayals in the tabloids, with a focus on family and love within marriage. Ageing people are represented as being unconditionally loved and loving. A story about a man still loving his wife despite her having dementia illustrates this pattern (Ringleben, 2020, p. 11). The tabloids speculate that this is the secret to a successful, lasting marriage. Stories such as this one are revealing of the way in which the portrayal of sexuality, relationships, and lifestyles in old age is directed into narrow, heteronormative channels. Despite this not being the primary focus of our study, it became obvious that other aspects of diverse identities in old age are denied space in media coverage as well (e.g., history of migration, race, or a past connecting to the German Democratic Republic do not feature in any article analysed).

In summary, the overall picture painted by the limited set of characteristics and representations of ageing people is narrow and mostly negatively connoted. This sets the scene for an insufficient perspective on ageing that focuses on the alleged deficits and emphasises old age as a process of physical and mental decay. The analysed sample reveals patterns of (in)visibility, which in turn indicate the precarious cultural citizenship of ageing people.

5. Discussion

In the following section, we will reflect on the intersectional entanglement of age with disability and gender, focussing on selected peculiarities of the discourse around older people during the pandemic. Finally, we will discuss moments of transgression, subversion, and irritation of prevailing patterns as signifiers of potential for change.

5.1. Pre-Existing Conditions, Vulnerability, and Numbers: Naturalising Death, Producing Invisibility, and Ungrievability

The fourth age can be understood as a period of intersectional entanglements, among them the intersection of age and disability; the analysis below is therefore also informed by disability studies. The category of vulnerability, a major characteristic in the representations in our sample, played a particularly vital role in the framing of the pandemic (Tremain, 2020). Since “86% of all Covid-19-deaths lived in care facilities” (“Bis zu 86%,” 2020, p. 2), old age appears as a natural risk factor. In this logic, death is viewed through the lens of age and pre-existing conditions. In our sample, the death of “the vulnerable” appears—cloaked in metaphors of nature and war—as fate. This prompts the question of *when life is grievable* in the journalistic discourse (Butler, 2009). Regarding disability in times of pandemic, Ktenidis (2020, para. 3) notes:

The deaths of those belonging to the “vulnerable” groups were deemed natural and, hence, mattered

less, in opposition to the deaths of people who were not vulnerable, and, therefore, their death was “unnatural” and mattered more. A hierarchical division between valuable, grievable lives (and deaths) and invaluable, ungrievable lives (and deaths) is in place.

Within our study, a comparable distinction in death in the context of the fourth age can be observed. Here, our findings are in line with a study that emphasises a similar portrayal of ageing people during the pandemic (Jen et al., 2021). The study indicates that while the deaths of young Covid-19 patients were presented in-depth as tragedies, ageing people’s deaths were not depicted with the same level of detail but instead were merely counted. Ageing people were shown either in the context of care institutions or statistical evaluations of incidences, death figures, or risk distributions. This shapes a certain image of old age that is limited to institutional contexts and associated with dying. Numbers do not have choices, voices, names, or faces, nor do they have biographies or families, as our analysis of agency demonstrated. Thus, they can hardly be grieved for. This distinction serves mainly to reassure all non-old people of their own safety. Personal fears can thus be projected onto others. In their study of news reports in the UK and Canada, Abrams and Abbott (2020, p. 168) state: “Each announcement of deaths in the first week was caveated with the ‘reassurance’ that most if not all of the people who had died had such [pre-existing] conditions.”

Through this framing of old age as a natural vulnerability, structures and political decisions remain invisible. However, when vulnerability is defined by age alone and not by socio-political circumstances, the underlying structural distribution of inequality is overlooked. Thereby, the distribution of risk becomes a biological fact, even though the risk of infection is by no means solely dependent on age and is not equally distributed among ageing people either: “The biological and medical construction of vulnerability...renders invisible the social, economic, and political relations that contribute to the increased precarious conditions of certain populations and allow for understanding their lives as unvaluable and thus ungrievable” (Mađarová et al., 2020, p. 17).

In summary, the devaluation of life at the intersection of age and disability is naturalised through the concept of pre-existing conditions and vulnerability. In this framework, the lives of ageing people remain invisible, their deaths ungrievable, and the political conditions shaping risk distribution remain undiscussed.

5.2. Ambivalent Visibilities: The Suffering Old Woman as Damsel in Distress

From a feminist perspective, old age can be conceptualised as an intersectional entanglement of age and gender. Emerging from the discourse, we see roles for women that follow traditional patterns of patriarchal

representation. The ageing woman dominates the pandemic discourse in both images and text. At first glance, this might be unsurprising since a majority of ageing people living in care facilities in Germany are women (Destatis, 2020). At the same time, however, positions with agency and explanatory roles are occupied by ageing men. The way in which the *old suffering woman* is made visible, therefore, is gendered.

The pandemic is narrated using metaphors of war, a highly gendered topos. While the notions of the fight, the saviour, and the hero have masculine connotations, women must be fought for because they need to be liberated or protected from the enemies (Archer, 2020). In the media, women are represented mostly as victims or as “damsels in distress.” This is a well-known sexist narrative in war reporting but is also common in video games in which a masculine hero rescues an innocent, passive woman (usually portrayed as sexy). Women’s power and agency are symbolically annihilated; they are forced into roles of traditional femininity. In this context, Klaus and Kassel (2005, p. 339) write:

Women are most often shown as victims of war and suffering from its consequences, while men have a much more active role in the media’s narratives either as defenders of the family and guardian of the “Heimat” or as perpetrators.

A very similar constellation is created by the media in the fight against the invisible enemy Covid-19. The lonely and highly vulnerable woman is grateful to be rescued by the saviour and is barely endowed with agency. She appears as the passive other, clearly distinct and demarcated from the acting journalistic we-group. Nevertheless, it is her for whom society stands together in solidarity, it is her who is to be saved by “us.” In the process, the needs of the ageing woman are not heard; even possible criticism of strict measures beyond what could have been expected of society—for example, being locked in a room—remains unnoticed. The questioning or demanding voices of the discourse are silenced just as the voice of the suffering woman is rarely heard. Only in instances when an ageing woman describes herself as vulnerable or grateful is the female position recognised.

This exemplary image depicts a woman who is locked in her room in a retirement home (Figure 1). The waving symbolises her contact with the outside world, while the gaze reflects her sorrow at the isolation she is experiencing. This image is part of the frequently utilised image type of isolation, primarily portraying women who are locked up during the pandemic. This motif echoes the gendered narrative of the damsel in distress. Depicting the dependency and suffering of the old woman, the image calls for solidarity. The accompanying article highlights the pandemic as a severe crisis that is particularly deadly for older people living in care facilities. At the time this article was published, the discourse is mainly characterised by an appeal to society to act collectively. This

joint effort is to be undertaken, inter alia, on behalf of the suffering old woman, in the name of her freedom, and to enable her to reunite with her family. In this context, the grandson of the woman photographed but not cited herself is being quoted with the following words:

It is very difficult for my grandmother (93). She is alone, can't leave her room most of the time, she can only be in the garden 30 minutes a day....Until a few weeks ago, only weekly visits by one person were allowed. Now we can only wave from the courtyard and bring her little things. We are very worried. (Neugebauer & Dombrowski, 2020, p. 9)



Figure 1. Image of the suffering old women in isolation. Source: Neugebauer & Dombrowski (2020, p. 9).

The suffering old woman can be interpreted as the face of the crisis, functioning as a morally charged symbol to make the exceptional situation comprehensible. She can be considered the embodiment of an appeal to the wider society to show sympathy and solidarity towards fellow human beings and to act reasonably with respect to the implemented containment measures. At the same time, within the discourse, her voice and her perspective are overlooked. This case illustrates the ambivalence of visibility, well known to feminist scholars and already illuminated by Schaffer (2015), who has noted that visibility does not equate with gaining power or having an actual say in the journalistic discourse. This point is particularly true when it comes to marginalised groups who can be both highly visible and powerless at the same time.

5.3. Irritations and Breaks Within the Discourse

Overall, the patterns which depict age as a burden to society remain widely unquestioned in the discourse.

Nevertheless, we traced two narratives with subversive potential.

Firstly, a potentially transgressive narrative emphasising the activity and ability of ageing people can be observed. They become visible as competent individuals in the discourse who can function as full and equal members of society. For example, one picture displays an ageing woman who is a retired doctor vaccinating her nurse ("Piks des tages," 2020, p. 1). These representations have the irritating potential to question hierarchically structured binaries—that is, activity and passivity, victim and saviour, as well as employee and retiree—through the reversal of roles. However, the focus on ability causes the exclusion of ageing people dealing with limited autonomy. For them, no positive integration into the discourse is provided. In this way, the focus on ability devalues the fourth age which is intersectionally affected by both age and disability.

A second but rare subversive moment is found in articles addressing the care crisis. At times, this critique is quite radical, pointing at the connection between the care crisis and global capitalism. In this frame, retirement homes in rich nation-states appear embarrassingly poorly equipped as an effect of the privatisation of the social sector within a neoliberal environment. Usually, this argument is illustrated by descriptions of the catastrophic and inhuman conditions ageing people are living in, both preceding and during the pandemic. This form of criticism addresses political structures and policy decisions but formulates its arguments mostly on the basis of stressed and underpaid staff while excluding ageing people's perspectives. By talking about them rather than with them, the articles victimise and passivise ageing people rather than render them visible. For example, a former nurse is cited with the following words:

I still see this small old woman who couldn't leave her bed, huddled in a foetal position, a very kind one, always polite. And then a nurse, longing for the end of the shift, yelling at her: "Did you shit yourself, old cunt [alte Sau]?" (Mayer & Wilhelm, 2020, p. 20)

In conclusion, it can be argued that certain social inequalities have come to the fore during the Covid-19 pandemic. The new intensity of existing intersectional inequalities could not be ignored or negated in this state of emergency. This has contributed to the new visibility of old insufficiencies. Overall, our analysis of the media representation of old people in institutions of care has demonstrated that the pandemic has placed the German care crisis into the media spotlight and, in some cases, the way in which neoliberalism undermines the welfare state has been sharply criticised. However, the inclusion of ageing people as equals has been widely absent.

By adopting an intersectional perspective, we identified two striking patterns of this (in)visibility: We first reflected on the fourth age as a period of intersectional entanglement of age and disability. Our argument—

using approaches from disability studies—is that the emphasis on pre-existing conditions in the media discourse moves the disabled fourth age close to death, or even renders it already dead; this practice dehumanises older individuals, excludes their voices from the public debate, and obscures their deaths from the public view. Secondly, age is gendered and can be examined from a feminist perspective, revealing sexist representations and reproductions. Traditional narratives of the strong, able, masculine saviour and the grateful, disabled woman in need of protection and help are highlighted in the discourse to morally appeal to a shared social responsibility. In the process, neoliberal conditions that limit the life chances of ageing people in care are symbolically annihilated and concealed. Ageing people who are portrayed as others are not able to raise their voices. Through homogenisation and dehumanisation, they do not have full cultural citizenship and participate in the journalistic discourse only to a limited extent. Emphasising one’s own ability and thus adapting to the midlife years seems to be the only form of precarious inclusion in the discourse.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the editors of the issue, Margreth Lünenborg, Miriam Siemon, and Wolfgang Reißmann. Their valuable and continuous feedback helped us with improving this contribution. We also want to thank our anonymous reviewers for their considerate and constructive feedback as well as Alden Blatter, Anay Katyal, and Benjamin Rogerson for their important assistance in proofreading the article at different stages.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Maternal Health Information Disparities Amid Covid-19: Comparing Urban and Rural Expectant Mothers in Ghana

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Submitted: 2 August 2022 | Accepted: 18 January 2023 | Published: 28 February 2023

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted mothers' access to credible and reliable health information from their healthcare providers. However, the impact of the pandemic on maternal health information access among rural and urban mothers has not been studied, especially in the Global South. Guided by the channel complementarity theory, we examined the sources of maternal health information rural and urban Ghanaian mothers used during the pandemic. Specifically, we analyzed the role access to technology plays in determining the quantity and quality of maternal health information expectant mothers had during the pandemic. Through purposive and snowball sampling techniques, we recruited and conducted in-depth interviews with 15 mothers, eight from rural communities and seven from urban communities in Ghana. We thematically analyzed the data and found that rural and urban mothers used medical and non-medical sources to obtain maternal health information. While medical sources remained the most credible information source even amid the pandemic, the mothers equally appreciated the immense benefits of other sources, particularly the internet. Our findings also suggest that the motivations for using maternal health information sources complementarily were not limited to the mothers' functional needs, level of interest, and source characteristics but also covered the mothers' location, resources, and health information literacy levels.

Keywords

Covid-19; Ghana; maternal health information; rural mothers; urban mothers

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps" edited by Margreth Lünenborg (Freie Universität Berlin), Miriam Siemon (Freie Universität Berlin), and Wolfgang Reißmann (Freie Universität Berlin).

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic posed serious economic, social, environmental, and health challenges to humanity. Dubbed a "once-in-a-century global health crisis" (Horton, 2020), it significantly burdened marginalized individuals in underdeveloped areas of the world, magnifying longstanding inequities across gender, race, and class (Fisher & Ryan, 2021; Obinna, 2021; Parry & Gordon, 2021).

On March 12, 2020, a day after the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a pandemic, Ghana recorded its first two cases. Several measures, includ-

ing a lockdown, the mandatory wearing of masks, a ban on social gatherings, and social distancing were implemented by the government and health institutions to curtail the spread of the virus (Kenu et al., 2020). One of the areas that were significantly impacted by these restrictions was maternal health services, which are essential to women during pregnancy, delivery, and postpartum. The pandemic posed unique challenges to pregnant women in most parts of the world as access to their providers became limited and irregular (Chasson et al., 2021; Pant et al., 2020; Temesgen et al., 2021). Some of these challenges include (a) psychological stress on mothers, (b) reduced facility-based births, (c) increased

mortality, and (d) reduced antenatal care (ANC) attendance (Asuming et al., 2022; Senkyire et al., 2023). ANC is a public health service that aims to prevent health risks through the early detection of abnormalities, the institution of corrective measures, and the spread of health education to ensure a good start to life for each newborn child (Manyeh et al., 2020). Considering these benefits, ANC visits are crucial, especially for women in low- and middle-income countries, who constitute almost 99% of maternal deaths worldwide (Adu et al., 2018; Boah et al., 2018).

The regularity of ANC check-ins with practitioners was disrupted due to virus transmission fears and the imposition of measures to reduce the spread (Green et al., 2020). However, in most developed countries, practitioners adjusted ANC protocols by switching to telehealth (Tolu et al., 2021). Thus, even though face-to-face healthcare was impacted, expectant mothers who were pregnant during the pandemic in developed nations still had access to their practitioners via internet-based applications. This significant switch typified the relevance of technology and telemedicine to maternal health. Unfortunately, this switch to telehealth was not available to many women in the rest of the world as there is increasing evidence of a widening digital divide between countries in the Global South and the Global North (Ogunsola & Okusaga, 2006). Moreover, the pandemic has widened the digital gap between the technological haves and have-nots globally (Khamis & Campbell, 2020). Sadly, with the absence of telehealth in most areas of the Global South, most expectant mothers experienced a lack of relevant maternal health information (MHI) from their providers and thus resorted to seeking MHI from other sources.

Furthermore, the impact of socio-economic discrepancies on information access, even within the same country, is significant. While individuals in urban areas enjoy higher socio-economic status and considerably easier and faster access to rich and credible health information, many of those in rural areas are technological have-nots or digital illiterates with limited health information options (Abekah-Nkrumah & Abor, 2016; Chen et al., 2019). Earlier studies have confirmed that access to health information can influence health behavior, healthcare access, health outcomes, and overall quality of life (Kelley et al., 2016). Specifically, mothers' access to the right sources of MHI positively impacts mothers' health behaviors during and after pregnancy (Galle et al., 2021). Thus, in places with unequal access to healthcare, alternative information sources are necessary to fill the knowledge gap caused by the lack of face-to-face healthcare and telehealth. However, literature comparing health information access between rural and urban mothers remains scant.

Therefore, this study investigates how expectant mothers from two areas in Ghana, namely more affluent urban areas and underserved rural communities, access MHI while equally navigating access to the health ser-

vices and resources needed to ensure a safe pregnancy and delivery during the pandemic.

2. Literature Review

Research has established that MHI is essential for women's health during pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum (Mulauzi & Daka, 2018). Keeping mothers informed about their pregnancy effectively prepares them for prenatal care, reducing pregnancy's adverse outcomes (Kamali et al., 2018; Sokey & Adisah-Atta, 2017). Existing literature reveals that mothers source MHI from varied sources, including healthcare providers, interpersonal networks, the internet, mass media, and books (Criss et al., 2015; Zhu et al., 2019).

Loudon et al. (2016) found that first-time mothers' (FTMs) information needs included sleep, nutrition, healthcare, family welfare, mother-infant groups/activities, and baby products and recommendations for getting these products. The authors found that the participants highly valued face-to-face communication with other mothers, followed by family and websites. They also found that the mothers' challenges include "lack of time and opportunity; conflicting information from different sources; requiring information about potentially contentious or sensitive topics; and lack of engagement with peers" (Loudon et al., 2016, p. 36). Greyson (2017) studied the health information practices of young parents in Canada. The study revealed that most participants were sophisticated information seekers with good access to information and highly networked through mobile technologies. However, participants faced challenges assessing the large quantity of information they retrieved. All these studies were conducted in urban areas.

Kassim (2020) and Das and Sarkar (2014) studied the MHI-seeking behavior of rural women in rural Tanzania and India, respectively. They found that rural mothers' information needs include the detection of pregnancy, pregnancy and delivery complications, use of traditional medicines during pregnancy, immunization and prevention of communicable diseases, and nutrition and exercise during pregnancy (Das & Sarkar, 2014; Kassim, 2020). Furthermore, they found that mothers had to overcome unique challenges to satisfy these information needs. These challenges include traveling long distances to health facilities, inadequate time spent with skilled professionals, lack of privacy, poor maternal health services, low level of education among pregnant women, and familial pressure in terms of chores and childcare (Das & Sarkar, 2014; Kassim, 2020). Kassim (2020) concludes that satisfying these information needs is crucial for rural women to make prompt and informed decisions about their maternal health.

From this review, a notable difference emerges between the information needs of women who live in economically advantaged areas and those in resource-impo-

as they have mainly focused on the MHI needs of mothers and the challenges or barriers to accessing MHI. This recurring pattern in the literature calls for investigating varied dimensions of MHI-seeking, such as complementary source use and its impact on the quality and quantity of MHI. Another gap in the existing literature pertains to the studied population. Most studies have focused on mothers from either urban or rural areas. To add to the current studies, we compare mothers from rural and urban areas since social inequalities inform mothers' access to and use of MHI (Sokey & Adisah-Atta, 2017; Ukonu & Ajaebili, 2021; Yakong et al., 2010). Finally, studies that apply communication theories to mothers' health information-seeking are limited. Therefore, using the channel complementarity theory, this study fills these gaps by investigating how rural and urban mothers' access to varied sources of MHI impacted the quality and quantity of MHI they received during the pandemic.

3. Theoretical Framework: Channel Complementarity Theory

Channel complementarity theory explains the use of multiple sources to seek information (Dutta-Bergman, 2004a). Dutta-Bergman (2004a, p. 44) asserts that when "motivated by an underlying interest in a certain subject or issue, the users of one medium in the domain of a specific content perhaps also use other media in the same content domain to gather information." Essentially, an individual's functional needs and the level of interest to satisfy those needs determine media usage (Dutta-Bergman, 2004b; Tian & Robinson, 2008), and newer media channels complement, rather than replace, older channels and face-to-face communication (Ruppel & Burke, 2015).

While the theory provides a general explanation for why information seekers use multiple sources to seek information, Ruppel and Rains (2012) extended the theory by (a) situating it in health communication literature and (b) arguing that source characteristics determine how users use different channels complementarily. Defining source characteristics as the relatively enduring structural or technical features of a source, the authors propose four source complementarity characteristics peculiar to seeking health information. First, *access to medical expertise* includes the degree to which a source makes it possible to gain access to medical practitioners. Second, *tailorability* refers to the degree to which users can acquire idiosyncratic information. Third, *anonymity* covers the degree to which the source conceals a user's identity. Finally, *convenience* entails the ease of access and use of a source.

Similarly, Lin and Dutta (2017) used this theory to understand the health information-seeking patterns of internet users in India, extending its use beyond the Western context. The authors observed that internet users use complementary channels to source health

information. Moreover, they detected a complementary relationship between internet use and interpersonal sources. Finally, they found that age impacted how users utilize the media complementarily, as younger information seekers were more likely to use multiple sources complementarily. Lin and Dutta's (2017) study is one of the few studies that highlight how individual characteristics impact source choice. Thus, we argue that rural and urban mothers' use of multiple sources complementarily is informed by their information needs, resources, geographical location, health information literacy skills, and source characteristics. This article contributes to the literature on health information seeking as it provides relevant insights into factors that inform complementary source use by information seekers from different economic, cultural, and social environments.

As such, we explore the following research questions:

RQ1: What MHI sources are available to rural and urban Ghanaian expectant mothers during Covid-19?

RQ2: How does access to technology, or lack thereof, impact the quantity and quality of MHI available to rural and urban Ghanaian expectant mothers during Covid-19?

4. Methodology

This qualitative research study adopted a phenomenological lens (Spencer et al., 2014) to unpack the complexities and nuances of the participants' lived realities, everyday experiences, behaviors, and practices as pregnant women navigating many hurdles, including limited access to MHI amid a deadly pandemic.

We purposively recruited participants using fliers that were shared on the social media pages (WhatsApp and Instagram) of the second author (Delight Jessica Agboada), who handled data collection. Mothers interested in the study then contacted the second author, who screened them according to the study's eligibility criteria. The criteria include the mothers being (a) Ghanaian, (b) at least 18 years of age, (c) pregnant during Covid-19, (d) having at least basic English proficiency, and finally, (e) living within an urban or rural area in Ghana (participants self-reported during the screening process and the interviewer, the second author, confirmed using the definition of rural and urban areas provided by Ghana Statistical Service, 2014).

Purposive sampling enabled us to select the best and most information-rich data available to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Staller, 2021). However, this initial search did not yield many mothers expressing interest in the study. Therefore, we used snowball sampling to increase the number of participants by asking the participants to refer others who might equally be qualified for the study. We used the same screening method for those participants recruited through snowball sampling. When our advertisements

yielded no more participants, we recruited a key informant through the researchers' contacts to recruit more participants. The key informant used our fliers to recruit more participants. The informant then connected the mothers who expressed interest in participating in the study with the second author via phone. The second author scheduled interviews with this set of mothers. Those who were not interested in participating after learning about the study dropped out without any penalty.

In total, we recruited 15 Ghanaian mothers from different towns and cities in the Volta, Central, Greater Accra, and Oti regions of Ghana. Overall, we had seven urban and eight rural mothers. Table 1 summarizes the research participants' demographics, including their status as first-time mothers (FTMs) or multiparous mothers (MPMs).

We conducted in-depth interviews with 14 mothers via phone calls and one via text messages. In-depth interviews allowed us to concentrate on MHI and ultimately co-create meaning with the participants by acknowledging their unique and important knowledge of the phenomenon (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The semi-structured interview questions covered a range of topics, including mothers' pregnancy-related health needs, how those needs are satisfied, and the impact of Covid-19 on MHI, among others. The interviews were conducted for four months, from April through July 2022. Most of the mothers had given birth at the time of the interview, while some were still pregnant. We capped the sample size at 15 when data from new participants added little value to the emergent analysis (Tracy, 2013). We reached saturation at 14 interviews but conducted one more interview to confirm saturation.

Each phone interview was audio recorded with the participants' verbal consent and lasted between 40 and

60 minutes. We retained the text of the text message interview as data with the consent of that participant. All interviews were conducted in English. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Maryland (1856806–1). Additionally, the regulations for international research under UNESCO, which has Ghana as a member country, are consistent with the provisions of the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board, which protect the identity and privacy of the participants and minimize the risks the study might pose to them.

We manually analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. First, we familiarized ourselves with the data by listening repeatedly. We then agreed upon the salient parts of the audio recording and transcribed only those essential parts, as these parts contained the data we needed for this study. We then anonymized the data using pseudonyms for each participant in the transcripts. The second author generated the initial codes. We then met over two meetings and jointly searched for the themes that captured the key ideas and reviewed, defined, and named the themes. Finally, we produced the report using thick and rich descriptions (Creswell & Báez, 2021).

5. Findings

5.1. Impact of Covid-19 on Mothers' Maternal Health Information Access

Undoubtedly, Covid-19 presented a plethora of challenges to mothers. However, the most significant impact of the pandemic on expectant mothers was psychological stress. Most of the mothers reported experiencing

Table 1. Research sample demographics.

No.	Name	Age	FTM or MPM	Occupation	Level of education	Area
1	Denise	29	FTM	Teacher	Bachelor's degree	Rural
2	Joyce	30	FTM	Sanitation and hygiene officer	Master's degree	Urban
3	Daniella	33	FTM	Social worker	Master's degree	Urban
4	Adjoa	37	MPM	Electrician	Technical certificate	Rural
5	Gifty	31	FTM	Learning coordinator	Master's degree	Urban
6	Angela	32	FTM	Stay-at-home mother	Master's degree	Urban
7	Steph	32	FTM	Social worker	Bachelor's degree	Urban
8	Rahinatu	24	FTM	Businesswoman	High school diploma	Urban
9	Emma	28	FTM	Businesswoman	Bachelor's degree	Rural
10	Afua	23	MPM	Student	Bachelor's degree	Rural
11	Naa	28	FTM	Teacher	Bachelor's degree	Rural
12	Esther	22	FTM	Unemployed	High school diploma	Rural
13	Vida	29	FTM	Teacher	College of education diploma	Rural
14	Seyram	33	MPM	Teacher	Bachelor's degree	Rural
15	Cecy	40	MPM	Lecturer	Master's degree	Urban

increased fear and anxiety during their pregnancies amid the pandemic. A notable trigger of this psychological stress was the fear of contagion. Most of them acknowledged how this fear led them to either delay ANC initiation, choose facilities with fewer patients or strictly adhere to the uncomfortable Covid-19 protocols. For example, Gifty, a 31-year-old learning coordinator with a master's degree who is an FTM and lives alone in an urban area, shared that "I did not attend ANC during the first trimester because I felt it wasn't completely safe because I was vulnerable. So, I consulted with a hospital online instead." This finding corresponds to the results of other studies that there was a reduction in ANC attendance (Senkyire et al., 2023; Tadesse, 2020).

Other mothers intimated their difficulty in keeping up with the Covid-19 safety measures. For example, Naa, a 28-year-old teacher with a college degree who is an FTM living with her nuclear family in a rural area, noted that "it was stressful wearing a nose mask all the time because I frequently experienced shortness of breath. The safety protocols then were burdensome for me." Finally, we found that Covid-19 redefined all the mothers' MHI needs. Essentially, the pandemic added many information needs for the mothers to satisfy. This meant that the mothers increasingly sought more information on topics unrelated to the traditional MHI needs established in extant literature. Some of the areas of concern for the mothers were mother-to-child transmission, Covid-19 risks and safety measures, and Covid-19 vaccine issues. In the next section, we discuss the various sources of MHI available to mothers amid the pandemic.

5.2. Research Question 1

The findings indicate that the mothers relied on various sources of MHI to better understand the changes pregnancy presented to them and generally manage motherhood amid the pandemic. These sources are in two broad categories: medical and non-medical sources of MHI. For medical sources of information, most mothers relied on their healthcare providers. For non-medical sources of information, most mothers sourced information from their interpersonal networks of family and friends, as well as new and mainstream media. These sources of information are presented below, focusing on the similarities and differences between rural and urban mothers.

5.2.1. Medical Sources of Information: Healthcare Providers

Visiting healthcare providers is a channel patients use for reliable health information (Tian & Robinson, 2008). The findings of this study reveal that the most relevant source of MHI available to the participants is their healthcare providers. All the mothers indicated using ANC services during different stages of their pregnancies and received MHI during these visits. Primarily, mothers receive MHI at health facilities in two ways. First, general

MHI is delivered by healthcare providers to the mothers during their ANC classes. This is an excellent example of what Greyson (2017) describes as *encountering information*, which involves a time when mothers were not actively seeking information but received it by simply being at the healthcare facility. Second, the mothers actively seek MHI during individual consultations with their healthcare providers by asking specific questions concerning their pregnancies and Covid-19. Often, these questions cover (a) changes the pregnancy had introduced to their bodies and (b) safe pregnancy practices, especially amid the pandemic.

Joyce, a 30-year-old sanitation and hygiene officer with a master's degree who is an FTM and lives alone in an urban area, mentioned, "I ask some questions—what to do, what not to do and the medications to take, the scans to do, when to do them, why am I prone to this or that?"

Seyram, a 33-year-old teacher with a bachelor's degree who is an MPM and lives with her nuclear family in a rural area with two children, mentioned that she asks questions concerning:

The care for myself and my unborn child because I have been observing people going through a lot from conception to delivery, so I was thinking that the only way to avoid that is to have more education so that in case I was going through those same things, I will know how to handle the situation.

We also found that mothers generally preferred their healthcare providers as their primary source of MHI because they found their information credible. This aligns with the finding of Criss et al. (2015) that mothers find their healthcare provider to be a trusted source of information. However, there were mixed reactions when asked to assess their satisfaction with the MHI received from their healthcare providers during their ANC visits amid the pandemic. All the rural mothers were quick to express their satisfaction with the information they received from their healthcare providers. However, only a few urban mothers expressed similar satisfaction.

Notably, the urban mothers who expressed satisfaction were mothers who used private facilities. For example, Gifty revealed that she was not so pleased with the depth of information she received from the public facilities. Hence, she used the private facility when she wanted detailed information about her health and her baby's wellbeing. This is confirmed in an earlier study (Abekah-Nkrumah & Abor, 2016), which indicated that dissatisfaction with some public facilities forces users to turn to private facilities.

Most of the rural mothers who expressed satisfaction with the information received from their healthcare providers attributed their satisfaction to their healthcare providers' friendly and approachable attitude. This made it easy for them to freely interact with their providers, enabling them to ask all their questions and receive credible information.

The urban mothers who were unsatisfied with the information they received indicated they were disappointed because of a few factors. First, some mentioned that they felt disrespected by their midwives, which resulted in them being hesitant to seek MHI. However, they had no option but to keep attending ANC until they gave birth. This is consistent with the findings of Yakong et al. (2010), who found that participants believed that they had no option but to accept disrespect from the nurses and thus kept to themselves to avoid conflict with nurses. Second, some participants were unhappy with the medical system in general, as the high patient-provider ratio reduces the time providers spend on one-on-one consultations, which inadvertently hampers the quantity and quality of the information received. This high patient-provider ratio is further complicated by Covid-19, making it very stressful for mothers to have their information needs met during their visits to their healthcare providers.

Adjoa, a 37-year-old electrician who is an MPM and lives in a rural area, narrated that her dissatisfaction with the public facility during her first pregnancy before Covid-19 forced her to seek the services of a midwife. She indicated her satisfaction with the midwife's services because of the depth of their one-on-one interaction during ANC. She stated that "she [the midwife] never gets annoyed or shouts at you under any condition," alluding to her prior experience with midwives at public facilities.

Aside from face-to-face information seeking, the findings also indicate that some rural and urban mothers had access to their providers outside regular ANC hours via phone and text. For example, Steph, a 32-year-old social worker living in an urban area, said, "the midwife gave me her personal number to call her anytime I had questions." The participants who had access to their providers outside ANC hours were either given personal phone numbers by their healthcare providers or had access to the general call number of their providers. In such cases, the mothers mainly reached their providers if they had urgent health matters that required immediate information from a credible medical source.

5.2.2. Non-Medical Sources of Information: Interpersonal Networks and Mainstream Media

When the mothers are not seeking or receiving MHI during their regular ANC, they use other sources of information to help them optimize their maternal health during their pregnancy. These include online sources, interpersonal sources, and mainstream media. We will discuss the interpersonal sources and mainstream media in detail below and elaborate on the use of online sources when discussing the findings of the second research question.

As for interpersonal networks, the findings of this study reveal that some mothers from both groups occasionally sought MHI from friends and families. In most instances, the mothers who sought information from

their families and friends specifically chose people with prior experience with childbirth or professional expertise in maternal health. Therefore, these mothers found value in the experiential nature of the information they receive from other mothers (Gagné et al., 2016; Loudon et al., 2016). When asked if she sourced information from others, Naa mentioned:

Yes, I was an ulcer [stomach] patient before pregnancy, which affected me badly, but I had one experienced mother [a friend] who always helped me cope with this condition. For example, she advised me on what kinds of fruits and foods I should avoid eating and how I should make sure to eat on time.

While those mothers who sought information from healthcare workers within their networks were able to affirm the credibility of the information they received, others questioned the credibility of information received from their lay family and friends. For instance, Afua, a 23-year-old college student who is an MPM living with her extended family in a rural area, observed:

We all know times are changing, and our health systems are changing compared to our mothers' times when they used herbal medicines for their healthcare. But now, all the chemicals they use on our crops affect herbs as well, so I would rather seek healthcare from a health facility rather than take the herbs my mother recommends.

Thus, she preferred seeking MHI from a trusted professional instead of relying on traditional knowledge.

Regarding mainstream media, contrary to what has been established in previous studies on rural Ghanaian women's use of mainstream media, such as radio sets, to seek health information (Sokey & Adisah-Atta, 2017), our findings reveal that most participants from both groups did not actively seek MHI through mainstream media. For example, Steph explained she does not use mainstream media to seek MHI because "it is difficult getting this type of information [MHI] through such media. They are not specific. There are no specific programs."

Whereas mothers in an earlier study purposely gleaned pregnancy and/or child health information through television (Criss et al., 2015), the mothers in our study who mentioned receiving MHI through television mainly did so through unintentional, passive encountering (Greyson, 2017). For example, Seyram recounted her experience with mainstream media:

I listen to some of this information occasionally on the radio, but as for TV, maybe only if I'm watching a film, for example, and for a brief moment, they advertise a program that is related to maternal healthcare. However, I never planned this in advance or did it on purpose.

Overall, our findings indicate that mainstream media do not satisfy the mothers' maternal information needs and are not considered primary or purposeful sources for obtaining reliable and credible MHI during the pandemic.

5.3. Research Question 2

5.3.1. Online Sources and Access to Maternal Health Information

All the mothers who live in urban areas have mobile devices with a strong and stable internet connection enabling them to access MHI via the internet, primarily using the search engine Google and other sites such as YouTube and pregnancy apps, including Baby Center and Pregnancy Calculator. Cecy, a 40-year-old lecturer with a master's degree who is an MPM living with her nuclear family in an urban area, confirmed that she uses websites and other pregnancy apps to access MHI.

However, Rahinatu, a 24-year-old businesswoman with a high school diploma who is an FTM living with her nuclear family in an urban area, was the only urban mother who did not use the internet to source MHI. She explained that she did not use the internet to source health information because she was denied access to a phone during her pregnancy because of family issues. She mentioned, "I did not use Google because I didn't have a phone to communicate or research anything."

Although earlier studies (e.g., Sokey et al., 2018) found substantial evidence that supports the implications of the urban-rural divide on rural women's MHI access, our findings are mixed. First, the rural participants are split into two categories—users and nonusers. The nonusers mainly attributed their nonuse to infrastructural barriers, such as the lack of stable internet connection. Thus, despite the desire some had to source MHI through the internet, they could not rely on the internet as the main MHI source.

On the other hand, the rural mothers who used the internet to access MHI expressed the importance of the internet in their search for and access to MHI. They mentioned that the internet helps them to (a) expand their knowledge base on maternal health during pregnancy, (b) understand the implications of Covid-19 on them, (c) get the needed MHI in the absence of their providers, and (d) be better prepared for ANC. For instance, Emma, a 28-year-old businesswoman from a rural area, explained: "I use Google whenever the midwives do not answer my calls." Thus, the internet helps her access MHI when she cannot communicate with her midwives.

Despite claiming satisfaction with the ANC services she received, Naa said: "Most times I don't get everything I need from the healthcare practitioners, so I go online to find out more information in addition." These findings are consistent with an earlier study which found that mothers sourced information online to meet unmet offline information needs and seek broader experiences

or opinions (Loudon et al., 2016). Interestingly, there was no apparent difference between rural and urban women while discussing the uses of the internet in sourcing MHI. The urban women also intimated using the internet for the same purposes as the ones enumerated above.

Even though the internet is vital in sourcing MHI, accessing information online does not come without challenges. We found that more rural mothers experienced challenges while seeking MHI through the internet than urban mothers. For example, some rural mothers indicated that, despite their desire to know more by resorting to the internet, they experienced difficulty getting a stable and strong internet connection. Other participants mentioned that it was difficult to determine the most credible information from the pool of information the internet provides. This finding is confirmed by existing literature that rural women experience more difficulties while seeking health information (Sokey & Adisah-Atta, 2017).

5.3.2. Impact of Access to Technology on the Quantity and Quality of Maternal Health Information

The findings indicate that the mothers' access to technology, mostly via a smartphone connection to the internet, impacted the depth and breadth of information they received from all the other sources. Most of the mothers valued the internet because it provided access to more information, which enabled them to fully understand the changes in their bodies and adjust accordingly. For instance, Denise, a 29-year-old teacher and FTM with a college degree living alone in a rural area who received care in an urban area, stated:

Sometimes I get more information from YouTube than I get from the hospital. We are many, so they [midwives] will just rush through the information without enough details at the hospital. So, YouTube helps me a lot in terms of filling some of these knowledge gaps.

Most of the participants shared Denise's experience. Thus, the internet becomes a secondary source of MHI when their primary source, healthcare providers, does not meet their expectations. This finding shows that although healthcare providers are considered a credible source of MHI, the limited time spent with them sometimes hampers the depth of information received.

Participants' thoughts were divided on the quality of information retrieved through the internet. While some believed the internet provides detailed and trustworthy information, others were not convinced. Additionally, the mothers' view of the quality of information on the internet determines how they use it. For instance, if a mother deems the internet a source of accurate, credible, and detailed information, she uses it to augment the MHI she acquires during ANC and, ultimately, source information through that resource more often.

However, when the credibility of the information is questioned, some mothers go through a fact-checking and validation process through their healthcare providers (Criss et al., 2015) during ANC, or they call/text them to validate the information before acting upon it. Therefore, the assessment of credibility is a factor that drives mothers' complementary use of MHI sources. The quote below illustrates how a mother used two different sources complementarily. Emma notes:

Towards the latter part [of the pregnancy], I was really having this thigh pain, and then I Googled, and I wasn't really sure of what to think because it gave me a lot of reasons. So I had to call the midwives. They gave me clear answers, and I was like: "Wow!" I really believed them, and they told me what to do and what not to do, and it worked.

Thus, the ability of the midwives to provide tailored information—information unique to one's circumstances—encouraged Emma to use midwives as a source of MHI in addition to the internet (Rains & Ruppel, 2016).

Interestingly, all the above information sources are similar to those health information seekers used in studies conducted before Covid-19 (e.g., Loudon et al., 2016; Rains & Ruppel, 2016). This finding indicates that MHI sources remained the same even amid the pandemic. The significant change, however, is the motivation behind using a source and its frequency. For most mothers, disruptions in ANC access and the psychological stress experienced while seeking ANC informed their frequent use of the internet in seeking MHI during the pandemic.

6. Discussion

Our findings indicate that rural and urban expectant mothers used complementary sources to seek MHI during the pandemic. We found various factors that informed complementary source choice and use among the mothers. The findings reveal substantial evidence supporting the theory's assumption that individuals' functional needs and level of interest determine source use (Dutta-Bergman, 2004b; Tian & Robinson, 2008). In our study, the mothers' need for MHI during their pregnancies and the desire for a positive pregnancy experience and safe delivery informed their choice of information sources. Similar to the findings of Kamali et al. (2018), we found that healthcare providers and the internet were significant information sources for rural and urban mothers during the pandemic. This finding highlights both the continued importance of interpersonal, face-to-face communication with healthcare providers and the significance of access to technology amid the pandemic. Thus, newer media complement rather than replace face-to-face communication (Ruppel & Burke, 2015).

Healthcare providers are a significant information source for mothers because they provide tailored and credible MHI; thus, both rural and urban mothers use this as their primary source of MHI. This finding is consistent with Ruppel and Rains' (2012) assertion that health information seekers consider their healthcare provider an authoritative and reliable source of health information because of their extensive training. In addition, this is supported by earlier conclusions by Tian and Robinson (2008) that complementarity extends beyond media usage to interpersonal contact with healthcare providers.

The findings support conclusions in extant literature that the internet has become an indispensable tool for sourcing health information (Zhu et al., 2019). In this study, the mothers used the internet as a source of MHI because it afforded anonymity and convenience during the pandemic (Kamali et al., 2018; Ruppel & Rains, 2012). In most instances, these characteristics were lacking in the other sources the mothers used. In addition, most mothers found it difficult to seek information on some personal issues because ANC consultations did not provide them with the needed privacy. Thus, the internet filled that gap and enabled the mothers to access MHI anonymously. Finally, the internet provided convenience as it helped the mothers access MHI instantaneously from the safety of their homes without risking being exposed to the virus. Therefore, the internet pairs well with the other information sources as it has characteristics that the other sources lack.

Although channel complementarity theory postulates that newer media do not replace older media, we discovered that a channel's ability to satisfy a need primarily informs its use with other channels (Dutta-Bergman, 2004b). Thus, participants' limited reliance on mainstream media, for example, is associated with the lack of maternal health content. This is substantiated by Tian and Robinson (2008, p. 186), who observe that "media channels that are unlikely to include relevant health information are unlikely to be attended to at the same level as media channels that do include relevant health information." Therefore, although some participants expressed interest in receiving MHI through mainstream media, the lack of relevant content discouraged them.

In addition to the mothers' functional needs, levels of interests, and source characteristics (Dutta-Bergman, 2004b; Ruppel & Rains, 2012), we found the mothers' health information literacy skills and access to resources to be significant in complementary source use. In essence, for mothers to use multiple sources complementarily, they must have the requisite skills and resources. This study revealed that the mothers needed to possess health information literacy skills and the necessary resources to combine multiple sources in seeking MHI. These information literacy skills include the mothers' abilities to source, evaluate, and use MHI. The resources include mothers' access to smartphones,

the internet, mobile data, and friends and family who have experienced pregnancy. Thus, the mothers who did not use multiple sources complementarily, especially those from rural areas, either lacked the literacy skills or access to the resources that would enable them to use various sources in seeking information.

7. Limitations

While this study provides evidence of MHI sources used by both rural and urban expectant Ghanaian mothers during the pandemic, it has some limitations. First, we interviewed only mothers with basic English proficiency. This recruitment criterion precluded low-educated mothers' perspectives. Therefore, future studies should recruit women with low literacy for more nuanced perspectives. Second, we interviewed when the impact of Covid-19 had declined in Ghana, and most of the participants had given birth. Therefore, the interview timeframe made some interviews ex post facto. Future studies should consider data collection during the peak of a pandemic to limit the impact of recall bias on the data. Finally, while this study provides substantial evidence of the sources of MHI for Ghanaian expectant mothers during the pandemic, it did not explore how access to MHI informs maternal health behaviors. Thus, future research should investigate how expectant mothers' access to MHI impacts their maternal health behaviors.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful for the funding they received from the Communication Research Award at the Department of Communication, University of Maryland, College Park, without which this study would not have been possible. They would like to express their gratitude to the editorial team of the journal *Media and Communication* for their help and support throughout the process of publishing this article, especially Ms. Raquel Silva. They are also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback and insightful comments, which strengthened this article. The authors are thankful to Dr. Victoria Newsom, professor of communication studies at Olympic College, and Ms. Jodi McFarland Friedman, doctoral candidate in the Philip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland, College Park, for their helpful editorial revisions. Last, but certainly not least, the authors are deeply grateful to the women who agreed to share their views and insights. This study would not have been possible without them.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Career, Covid-19, and Care: (Gendered) Impacts of the Pandemic on the Work of Communication Scholars

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Submitted: 29 July 2022 | Accepted: 30 November 2022 | Published: 28 February 2023

Abstract

The study at hand analyzes the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and related restrictions on scholars in the area of media and communication studies. It aims to highlight inequalities in the negative effects of the pandemic on academic output by examining the working conditions of scholars, taking into account gender, parenthood, and the partnership-based division of professional and care work. The quantitative survey was directed at communication scholars in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The findings show that there are no significant gender differences in terms of changes in academic output during the first 15 months of the pandemic; instead, disadvantages were observed in terms of parenting, regardless of the gender of the parents. Gender-specific effects could be detected concerning family situations and partnerships. Here, male participants are more often found in relationships in which the partner only works half-time, than women who mostly live with a partner who works full-time. The data suggest that gender differences related to changes in the time allotted for professional and care work and academic output are leveled out by the characteristics of the academic career model in which German-speaking scholars work. Nevertheless, gendered structures in academia and partnerships shape how the impact of the pandemic on professional work is experienced.

Keywords

academic output; care work; communication studies; Covid-19; gender gap; German-speaking countries; inequality; transnational perspective

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps” edited by Margreth Lünenborg (Freie Universität Berlin), Miriam Siemon (Freie Universität Berlin), and Wolfgang Reißmann (Freie Universität Berlin).

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1. Introduction

The sharing of professional and care work, which is always gendered, inevitably had to be renegotiated after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, especially during the imposed containment measures. Numerous studies and research findings indicate a “re-traditionalization” (Allmendinger, 2020) regarding gender roles and a gender-specific division of labor as care work is borne primarily by women (e.g., Berghammer, 2022; Craig, 2020). Professionals

who were expected to remain in their home office during the pandemic were particularly challenged because they also had to manage childcare, homeschooling, and housework in the time they normally had exclusively for professional obligations. Concerning academia, there was concern that the gender gap would widen as a result of these multiple burdens (e.g., Flaherty, 2020; Frederickson, 2020).

This study extends previous research on the impact of the pandemic on academia and takes a new focus by evaluating the self-reported publication activities and

research accomplishments of scholars in media and communication studies, a previously understudied discipline. Special consideration is given to contextual factors, such as partnership, parenthood, and the age of the children under care. The aim of the study was to find out which individuals are particularly affected by pandemic-related restrictions and especially what influence gender, relationship status, and parenthood have on academic output during the pandemic. Parenthood is relevant for us here only in connection with the performance of care tasks. When mothers or fathers are referred to elsewhere in the text, this does not necessarily mean the biological parents, but a person who identifies as female or male, lives with children, and is responsible for their upbringing.

We conducted an online survey aimed primarily at communication scholars working in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The results show that parenthood is the most influential factor in academic discrimination during the pandemic. No significant gender differences emerged regarding self-assessed publication activity during the pandemic or relating to the increase in care work and the reduction in time available for professional work—although women have invested more hours in care work in absolute terms than men both before, during, and since the pandemic.

2. The Gendering of Professional Work and Care

In this study, gender generally and the terms “women” and “men” specifically, are regarded as socially defined categories that become relevant in everyday life through the interplay of continuous, socially anchored processes of attribution and articulation. In our understanding of these and related terms, we explicitly integrate those women and men who are often not recognized as such in the rigid system of heteronormative gender binary. Members of societies bring concepts of gender into life by doing gender (West & Zimmermann, 1987), but can also deconstruct them via deviating articulations that question established constructs (Butler, 2006). On a societal level, these continuous articulations primarily make gender culturally meaningful and fuel the symbolic system of gender binary (Hagemann-White, 1984), which functions as a principle of structuring society (Rakow, 1986). Both become relevant in terms of articulating not only gender but also one’s identity as both a professional and caregiver.

Professional and care work are, on the one hand, shaped by gendered structures. On the other hand, it is the subjective (de-)construction of gender in both contexts that renews these structures. “Gendered structures” are generally “permeating academic institutions” (Bender et al., 2022, p. 48) as a working field, as the “structuring effects of gendering processes...conform with the structures of dominance” (Becker-Schmidt, 2002, p. 26). Research has shown that female academics have fewer career prospects than males (Le Feuvre et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2022). This is also true for

German-speaking communication studies (Riesmeyer & Huber, 2012, p. 16)—a working field that was once described as a “gendered organization” (Prommer et al., 2006). Previous research has shown that it has not changed fundamentally since the early 2000s: Women hold only one-third of the full professorships (Prommer & Riesmeyer, 2020, p. 7) and half of the postdoc positions, even though they represent the majority of doctoral students (Engesser & Magin, 2014, p. 319). We expect the pandemic to reinforce these gender-bound structures and gender inequality in communication studies in German-speaking countries.

Gender as a structuring category and a central aspect of identity construction is assumed to play a role in the ways in which communication scholars handle the interplay of care and professional work during the pandemic. Domestic and care work are generally organized along gendered structures of partnerships and the domestic sphere (Wimbauer & Motakef, 2020, p. 54). They are also reproduced via doing gender—according to what makes sense to the subjects against the background of the social field in which they are articulating themselves. The division of work between partners is often strongly gendered, even if they are both highly qualified (Wimbauer, 2012) because more traditional gender identifications are articulated in the context of partnerships. Thus, they are more dominant than identity articulations that construct the subject as a professional. Consequently, women are more likely to engage in unpaid domestic care work than men, which results in a gendering of care work as a task primarily performed by women. Referring to this, our study asks how German-speaking communication scholars have structured their working routines concerning the integration of professional work and care during the pandemic, which means care work in general, but especially childcare.

3. The Gendered Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Academic Work and Output

A large number of bibliometric studies from various disciplines have been published to date that show that the proportion of women among authors decreased significantly in the first phase of the pandemic (e.g., Andersen et al., 2020; Squazzoni et al., 2021), while publication activity increased overall (Cui et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022). This reduction is particularly evident among female first authors (e.g., Jemieliak et al., 2022), among younger female scientists in their early and mid-career phase (Kwon et al., 2021), and in the life sciences. To the best of our knowledge, the only communication science journal for which such a study is available did not show any differences in the gender distribution of authors before and after the spread of Covid-19—although the authors give valid reasons why such an effect may, nevertheless, exist (Karnowski & von Pape, 2022). Furthermore, women are underrepresented as authors in the research on Covid-19 (Amano-Patiño et al., 2020; Pinho-Gomes et al., 2020).

Some studies have used other methodological approaches to examine the research productivity of scholars during the crisis, such as an analysis by Kim and Patterson (2022) of 1.8 million tweets from 3,000 political scientists showing that women have posted comparatively fewer work-related tweets since the beginning of the pandemic, while their family- and caregiving-related tweets increased over the same period compared to men. There are also survey studies, both quantitative and qualitative, based on self-reporting by scholars that aim to provide a more in-depth analysis of working conditions during the pandemic (e.g., Deryugina et al., 2021). Focusing on a specific country, such as Canada (Gordon & Presseau, 2022) or India (Jiwani, 2022), a specific status group, such as early career scholars (Kınikoğlu & Can, 2021), or a specific structural characteristic, such as maternity (Martucci, 2021), all confirm that women in academia faced severe constraints and disadvantages especially when raising children due to the double burden of professional and care work (Kasymova et al., 2021, p. 430; Martucci, 2021, pp. 17–18). The debate centers mainly on economics, the natural sciences, and medicine as disciplines (Cushman, 2020; King & Frederickson, 2021); with a few exceptions (e.g., Sawert & Keil, 2021), the social sciences and humanities are not the focus of attention.

The primary reason for the decline in scientific output identified in the survey data was the decrease in the time the female scientists, who appeared to be the ones most negatively affected by Covid-19, had available for professional work, especially those caring for young children (Deryugina et al., 2021). The fact that women spend a disproportionate amount of time on housework and childcare and less time on research is closely linked to the enactment of gendered roles and social norms related to housework and caregiving tasks. As findings on the impact of children on scholarly productivity in academia before the pandemic are mixed (King & Frederickson, 2021, p. 5) but indicate that mothers face greater restrictions in their careers (Gordon & Presseau, 2022, pp. 1–2), we suppose that communication scholars who identify as female are generally more engaged in child care, invested even more time during the pandemic, and are, therefore, affected the most because of the gender-based division of labor. Other causes may also play a role according to research, such as women investing more time in teaching after the abrupt transition to the remote modus (Heo et al., 2022) or being more engaged in service and administration tasks (King & Frederickson, 2021). Factors such as the partner's flexibility in pursuing their professional work are especially relevant because they contribute to determining how much time female scholars have available for research activities in addition to domestic responsibilities (Martucci, 2021).

Against this backdrop, our study explores the following question of what gender-specific impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the academic work and output of communication scholars (RQ1) and asks about the country-specific differences in the three countries stud-

ied: Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (RQ2). Thus, it aims to contribute to the existing research in three ways. Firstly, it focuses on communication studies, a discipline at the intersection of social sciences and humanities that has received little attention in the academic discourse on the gendered impact of Covid-19 on scientific work. Secondly, the results presented below are not based on bibliometric analysis but focus on subjective perceptions of strains and challenges during the pandemic, as well as self-assessments of the scholarly output targeted and achieved. The survey stands out in that it is not limited to the first phase of the pandemic, but takes a look at the working conditions of communication scholars over a period of more than a year. Thirdly, we include in our data analysis the employment extent of respondents' partners because, given the theoretical considerations in Section 2, we assume that the negotiation and distribution of (additional) care work is deeply gendered within partnerships and family constellations. This aspect has hardly been studied in the academic context, with a few exceptions (Deryugina et al., 2021; Martucci, 2021).

Based on the theoretical considerations and the state of research presented, we assume that respondents who identified as female had a lower academic output during the study period than those who identified as male (H1). Analogously, we assume that this was more likely to be the case for mothers than for fathers (H1a), and for those raising children more than for respondents without care responsibilities (H1b). We also hypothesize that communication scholars who identify as female invested more time in care work during the pandemic than their colleagues who identified as male (H2). This presumably affects mothers more than fathers (H2a) and parents more than respondents without parental responsibilities (H2b). In the same way, we expect that communication scholars who identified as female had to reduce their work hours during the pandemic more than their colleagues who identified as male (H3), similarly, mothers more than fathers (H3a), and parents more than respondents who do not parent (H3b). Referring to the research on the relevance of the partner's scope of employment and taking into consideration that the part-time ratio in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland is significantly higher among mothers than fathers (Eurostat, 2021; Skinner et al., 2021), we assume that communication scholars who identified as male and work full-time are more likely to have a partner who works part-time than their counterparts who identified as female (H4a). If hypothesis H4a is verified, we assume that this couple constellation also has an influence on the pandemic-related change in care work, because mothers are less able to delegate care work to a partner working part-time and are also less inclined to do so due to socially embedded gender roles. We, therefore, anticipate that full-time working female communication scholars with children to care for increased their share of care work in the study period more than full-time working male communication scholars with parental obligations (H4b).

4. Method

The aim of the study was to describe the impact of Covid-19 on communication scholars on all levels and in all forms of employment in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. We follow an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989) by comparing differences between communication scholars who identified as female and male, and between those who have cared for children during the pandemic and those who have not—always in relationship to the caregiver’s gender. Consequently, despite the socio-constructivist approach, the empirical design follows the idea of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak & Landry, 1996, p. 204), i.e., gender binary is restored with the goal of identifying and naming inequalities that affect the working conditions of all scholars.

4.1. Participants

Respondents for the survey were recruited in collaboration with the three professional academic associations: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft (DGPK, Germany), Österreichische Gesellschaft für Kommunikationswissenschaft (ÖGK, Austria), and Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Kommunikations- und Medienwissenschaft (SGKM, Switzerland). A web survey via SoSci Survey was distributed using newsletters and direct mailings to the members of the respective associations. The online survey ran from 14 April–7 May 2021. At that time, as published in self-reports, the DGPK had 1,214 members (610 women, 604 men), the SGKM had 272 members (145 women, 139 men), and the ÖGK had 103 members (47 women, 56 men). A prerequisite for participation was employment at a university, university of applied sciences, or comparable research institution.

Incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the analysis, which resulted in a sample of $n = 293$ respondents. We did not exclude individuals who refused to give personal information, such as age or gender. Overall, we counted 1.1% of individuals in the sample who identified as nonbinary. These are not considered in this article, as its aim is an analytical differentiation between those who identified as male (40.8%) and those who identified as female (59.2%). The majority of the participants (77.4%) relate themselves to the DGPK, and additionally, 14% have a dual membership (DGPK plus SGKM or DGPK plus ÖGK). The sample was mostly balanced in terms of age, as Table 1 shows.

The average age was 41.7 years, and 40.1% reported that they are living together with children who are 19 years old or younger. The sample generally shows a high percentage of academics living in partnerships (overall, 74.8%). It needs to be pointed out here that men are more likely to live in a relationship (79.1% compared to only 71.9% of the female participants). The majority (72%) of the respondents of the survey work up to 100% (scope of employment of at least 75%), and 40%

are in continuing positions. Related to the international comparison, the majority of the participants work at a German university, while 10.8% work in Austria, and 11.9% in Switzerland.

4.2. Measures

Participants were asked to fill out an online survey featuring sociodemographic questions, questions on academic career, position, and university; furthermore, the respondents were asked to describe their family status (i.e., relationship, raising children) and also give some information relating to the employment status of their partner (i.e., half-time or full-time job). The majority of the questions were conceptualized to explore the impact of the pandemic and related regulations and restrictions on teaching, research, and service, with a specific focus on academic output (projects, publications, and conferences). All items were reviewed by experts and pretested on a small scale ($n = 12$). Dichotomous items and 5-point Likert items (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) were used, next to dropdown items to retrieve the volume of time invested for care, household, leisure, and academic work (measured in hours). Regarding the impact of the pandemic, we were able to combine formal questions, such as the volume of hours spent for professional, care, and household work and the support universities offered during the pandemic, with questions for self-evaluation around the individual academic output, structured around scales of “I did more/equally/less than before the pandemic,” “more/equally/less than I expected,” and similar items. We contextualized the notion of “care” with a narrow understanding of “active” care as including all tasks, activities, and structural components that are directly involved in care processes done in the service of others, particularly children and older relatives. The survey was conducted in German, where the term “*Betreuung*” that we used in the questions and categories means more than empathy and rather actual supervision and taking care of, which includes a certain investment of time and specific actions.

4.3. Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were applied following the questions of how much the pandemic impacted academics in the dimensions of teaching, research, and output related to gender and care duties. The measurement depends on the research question: the evaluation of publications and conferences is based on a Likert scale and, thus, allows an ordinal level of measurement. Exemplarily, we calculated the percentages of answers among the participants on the Likert scales (1 = *not likely*, 2 = *somewhat likely*, and 3 = *very likely*). The hours that the participants of the survey invested in care and work are based on a ratio scale; we refer in the analysis to the mean and median in the findings. The changes in working hours and time invested in care duties were clustered for analytical

Table 1. Sample: A socio-demographic overview.

		Age groups			Partnership			Children			Country of the workplace							
Gender (<i>n</i> = 282)		Male (<i>n</i> = 112)	Female (<i>n</i> = 159)	Total (<i>n</i> = 271)	Male (<i>n</i> = 115)	Female (<i>n</i> = 167)	Total (<i>n</i> = 282)	Male (<i>n</i> = 115)	Female (<i>n</i> = 167)	Total (<i>n</i> = 282)	Male (<i>n</i> = 111)	Female (<i>n</i> = 157)	Total (<i>n</i> = 268)					
Male	40.8%	Age 24–36	25.9%	44.7%	36.9%	Yes	79.1%	71.9%	74.8%	Respondents raising children	48.7%	34.1%	40.1%	Germany	68.5%	77.7%	73.9%	
Female	59.2%	Age 37–49	42.9%	37.7%	39.9%	No	20.9%	28.1%	25.2%		Respondents not raising children	51.3%	65.9%	59.9%	Austria	15.3%	7.6%	10.8%
		Age 50–62	24.1%	15.7%	19.2%					Switzerland		12.6%	11.5%	11.9%	Other countries	3.6%	3.2%	3.4%
		Age 63–71	7.1%	1.9%	4.1%													

reasons, similar to the children's age, in order to differentiate according to the type of care/schooling. They were then measured using a nominal scale that does not allow for statistical analysis other than reporting numbers and percentages.

Thus, we worked predominantly with the percentages of responses, mainly for the categories of changes in hours invested in academic work (publications and output, teaching, and project-related endeavors). The data refers to the last semester in spring 2021. Concerning working hours, they were summarized into three groups for differentiating the scope of employment: less than seven hours per day = part-time employment; between seven and nine hours per day = full-time employment; or more than nine hours = overtime. We compared the percentages of these groups using bar charts. Additionally, Pearson's chi-square tests (Cohen, 1988; Field, 2009) were applied to examine the statistical differences between men and women as well as between those who are raising children and those who are not. All analyses were conducted in SPSS.

This article focuses on gender differences and the impact of Covid-19-related restrictions on academics and their work, therefore, we did not apply further (multivariable) regression analyses exploring individual perceptions of capacities or resilience to cope with an increase in care duties.

5. Results

5.1. Gender and Scholarly Output During the Pandemic

One of the key questions of the study at hand was about gender differences related to scholarly output during the Covid-19 pandemic. A chi-square test on the interrelation of gender and the realization of publications was not significant ($p = .393$). A total of 63.2% of those who identified as male and 58.7% of those who identified as female said that they did not fully meet their publication plans. Only a very small group, 9.3% of the respondents who identified as male and 13.4% of those who identified as female, reported that they published more than originally planned. Related to the impact on research activities, more communication scholars who identified as male (29%) than those who identified as female (18.7%) felt affected by an increase in care work. We also asked whether they presented fewer conference papers due to care commitments. Here, the chi-square test examining the interrelationship with gender was also not significant ($p = .348$). Thus, H1 was not proven. The data does not show that female communication scholars reported being more limited in their professional output than their male colleagues.

It was also tested whether gender, raising children, and a successful realization of publication plans were interrelated. A chi-square test was not significant ($p = .246$). Nevertheless, a chi-square test on this interrelationship of parenthood in general and the success-

ful realization of publication plans, in particular, was significant ($p = .001$). A total of 73.1% of the respondents raising children said that they did not publish what they had planned, but only 52% of their colleagues without childcare obligations reported the same. By contrast, 9.6% of the parents in the sample, but 24.3% of the non-parenting respondents answered that they had met their publication plans. Additionally, a chi-square test was significant for the communication scholars who were raising children and identified as male compared to those who identified as male and were not raising children ($p = .002$), but not for those who identified as female and were raising children compared to those who were female and not raising children ($p = .185$).

More communication scholars without children responded that they had even increased their publication output than communication scholars with children. A chi-square test was significant ($p = .005$). Only 1.9% of the communication scholars raising children who identified as male and 6% of those identified as female reported that they had published more, but 16.7% of the respondents who were not raising children and identified as male as well as 17.2% of those who identified as female. Again, raising children and reporting that they had not published more was significant for male respondents ($p = .029$) but not for female respondents ($p = .131$).

Being a parent and reporting that research was limited because of pandemic-related care work is interrelated. A chi-square test was highly significant ($p = .000$). While 50.9% of the parents (mostly) agreed, only 3.8% of their colleagues without children reported the same. About a fifth (19.8%) of parents partly agreed, but only 5.1% of the communication scholars without children. By contrast, 91% of the communication scholars without children (mostly) disagreed that they faced limitations in research resulting from pandemic-related care work, but only one-third of the parents said the same (29.2%). Chi-square tests were highly significant in both gender categories ($p = .000$).

More parents reported giving fewer presentations at online conferences than they had scheduled for in-person events than their colleagues without children. About half (48.5%) of the parents said they had delivered fewer presentations at online conferences, while only 4.1% of their peers without children reported the same. Vice versa, 44.7% of parents reported that care and household work had had no impact on their ability to present at online conferences, while 93.8% of respondents without children reported the same. Communication scholars who were raising children and identified as female ($p = .000$) and those who identified as male ($p = .000$) are equally affected. H1a was not proven whereas H1b was verified.

5.2. Gender and Care Work During the Pandemic

A chi-square test was conducted to examine the relationship between gender and changes in the amount

of caregiving (childcare or care of dependents) and housework per day, and to determine whether the burden of communication scholars who identified as female increased more during the pandemic compared to those who identified as male. It was not significant ($p = .216$), therefore, H2 was not proven. Both men's and women's care and household work increased to a total of 3.68 hours per day, which was 49.6% more than before the pandemic. A total of 56.7% of male respondents and 48.4% of female respondents reported that they had put more hours into care and household work during Covid-19. We conducted chi-square tests to determine whether more respondents who identified as female and were raising children increased their caregiving and household work than communication scholars who identified as male and were raising children, which was not significant ($p = .314$). A total of 88.9% of male and 82.7% of female respondents with childcare responsibilities increased their share of care and household work during the pandemic. It should be noted, however, that the average time spent on care and household work during the pandemic in absolute terms is higher for female respondents raising children, at 6.69 hours than for male respondents raising children, at 6.09 hours.

The majority (85.8%) of respondents raising children reported increasing their amount of care and household work per day during the pandemic; this relationship was expectedly highly significant ($p = .000$). The interrelationship of the age of the children and the changes in the

amount of care and household work was also significant ($p = .001$). Compared to pre-pandemic times, 96.8% of parents with school-age children (7–12 years) and 87% of parents of babies and toddlers (0–3 years) reported an increase, as well as 89.7% of parents of young children (4–6 years), and 52.9% of parents of teenagers (13 years and older; see Table 2). Of those who said they increased their care work by five or more hours per day following the outbreak of the pandemic, parents of young school-age children (7–12 years) represented the relatively highest proportion of respondents at 19.4%. A total of 13% of the parents of children aged 0–3 years, 13.8% of parents of 4–6-year-old children, and 5.9% of parents of children over 13 years report the same. A chi-square test on this interrelationship was also significant ($p = 0.01$). H2b was, thus, verified, parenthood is a significant predictor regarding the increase in care and household work.

Additional tests on the interrelationship of changes in the amount of care work and the country of the workplace were not significant. However, parents working in Germany most often reported doing more care work than before the pandemic, namely, 89.2%. Of the scholars working in Austria, 76.9% of respondents with children reported doing more care work, compared to 75% in Switzerland. By contrast, only about a quarter of the respondents without childcare obligations (Germany: 27.1%, Austria: 22.2%, and Switzerland: 27.8%) stated that they had performed more care work during the pandemic (see Table 3).

Table 2. Changes in care hours during the pandemic in relation to the age of children living in the household.

	Age groups of children			
	0–3 years (<i>n</i> = 23)	4–6 years (<i>n</i> = 29)	7–12 years (<i>n</i> = 31)	13 years and older (<i>n</i> = 17)
Fewer care hours during the Covid-19 pandemic	8.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Similar care hours during the Covid-19 pandemic	4.3%	10.3%	3.2%	47.1%
More care hours than before the Covid-19 pandemic	87.0%	89.7%	96.8%	52.9%

Note: $p = .000$.

Table 3. Changes in care work during the pandemic in relation to the country of the workplace.

	Germany		Austria		Switzerland	
	Respondents raising children (<i>n</i> = 74)	Respondents not raising children (<i>n</i> = 107)	Respondents raising children (<i>n</i> = 13)	Respondents not raising children (<i>n</i> = 9)	Respondents raising children (<i>n</i> = 8)	Respondents not raising children (<i>n</i> = 18)
Fewer care hours during the Covid-19 pandemic	2.7%	5.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.6%
Similar care hours during the Covid-19 pandemic	8.1%	67.3%	23.1%	77.8%	25.0%	66.7%
More care hours than before the Covid-19 pandemic	89.2%	27.1%	76.9%	22.2%	75.0%	27.8%

Note: $p = .753$.

We also tested if there were national differences concerning the question of whether respondents received support services from the university for which they worked during the pandemic. A chi-square test was highly significant ($p = .000$). German universities were clearly more employee-friendly as 65.2% of the respondents working for them received support, but only 37.9% of those working in Austria, and 31.3% working in Switzerland. It should be noted, however, that the number of respondents who reported working in Austria (10.8%) or Switzerland (11.9%) is quite small compared to respondents based in Germany, making comparability difficult.

5.3. Gender, Raising Children, and Working Hours During the Pandemic

Looking at the interrelationship between gender and changes in the number of working hours in order to see if more communication scholars who identified as female had reduced their working hours during the pandemic, another chi-square test was conducted which did not reach significance ($p = .068$). Gender does not predict whether respondents will spend less time working during the pandemic. We also tested the interrelationship between gender and the number of working hours per day during the pandemic, which is not significant either ($p = .313$). Gender also does not predict the number of working hours. H3 was not proven.

We did chi-square tests to find out whether respondents who identified as female and were raising children were more likely to reduce their working hours than communication scholars who identified as male and were raising children. It was not significant ($p = .734$). However, the interrelationship between parenthood in general and changes in the number of professional work hours accumulated during the pandemic was highly significant ($p = .000$). A total of 15.1% of the parents worked one to six hours before the pandemic. During the pandemic, considerably more of the parents (40.6%) worked between one to six hours per day. The proportion of communication scholars without children who work one to

six hours a day (5.8%), is only slightly higher than before the pandemic (5.2%). Most of the communication scholars with children (75.5%) worked between seven and nine hours per day before the pandemic. During the pandemic, only 49.1% of them worked this number of hours.

It has to be pointed out that a larger number of childless communication scholars increased their working hours: 32.9% of them worked more than nine hours per day during the pandemic, whereas only 17.6% of them worked that long before Covid-19. In comparison, 10.4% of the communication scholars with children worked more than nine hours during the pandemic, which is only 1% more than before (see Table 4).

We also tested whether the children's age and changes in the number of working hours were related. This was also significant ($p = .004$; see Table 5). Just over half (52.2%) of the parents of children aged 0–3 years, 34.5% of the parents of children aged 4–6 years, and 32.3% of the parents of children 7–12 years reduced their working hours. But only 5.9% of the parents with older children reported that they worked less. H3a was not proven, whereas H3b was verified. Thus, instead of gender, parenthood predicts if communication scholars reduced their working hours during the pandemic.

5.4. The Distribution of Care and Professional Work in Partnerships With Children

We also used a chi-square test to examine the relationship between the gender and the scope of employment of the partner, which was significant ($p = .001$). Among respondents with children who were in a partnership and employed full-time, 51.2% of men but only 12.5% of women had a partner who worked half-time and was employed up to 50%. A total of 71.9% of women in this group of respondents but only 24.4% of men had a partner who was also employed full-time (scope of employment between 76%–100%). H4a was, thus, verified (see Table 6).

Full-time working female respondents raising children reported spending an average of 3.62 hours per day on care and household work before the pandemic

Table 4. Working hours per day of respondents raising children and respondents not raising children before and during the pandemic.

	Part-time (1–6 working hours/day)		Full-time (7–9 working hours/day)		Overtime (10 and more working hours/day)	
	Before the Covid-19 pandemic	During the Covid-19 pandemic	Before the Covid-19 pandemic	During the Covid-19 pandemic	Before the Covid-19 pandemic	During the Covid-19 pandemic
Respondents raising children ($n = 106$)	15.1%	40.6%	75.5%	49.1%	9.4%	10.4%
Respondents not raising children ($n = 153$)	5.2%	5.8%	77.1%	61.3%	17.6%	32.9%

Notes: Before the Covid-19 pandemic— $p = .008$; during the Covid-19 pandemic— $p = .000$.

Table 5. Changes in working hours during the pandemic in relation to the age of children living in the household.

	Age groups of children			
	0–3 years (n = 23)	4–6 years (n = 29)	7–12 years (n = 31)	13 years and older (n = 17)
Fewer working hours during the Covid-19 pandemic	52.2%	34.5%	32.3%	5.9%
Similar working hours during the Covid-19 pandemic	39.1%	65.5%	51.6%	94.1%
More working hours than before the Covid-19 pandemic	8.7%	0.0%	16.1%	0.0%

Note: $p = .004$.

and an average of 6.03 hours during the pandemic. Accordingly, they increased their share of care work by 66.57% after the spread of Covid-19. Male full-time working respondents with childcare responsibilities increased their share of care work by 61.21% after the spread of Covid-19: from 3.3 to 5.32 hours. It is notable that this group of respondents stated that their partners spent more time on care work on average during the pandemic than they did, while female full-time working respondents with childcare responsibilities stated that their partners spent fewer hours on care work on average during the pandemic. Hypothesis H4b is, thus, also verified.

6. Discussion

Previous research has focused predominantly on the impact of the pandemic on gender differences (e.g., Cui et al., 2021; Zimmer, 2020) and showed that women in academia have been affected disproportionately, mainly concerning their publication output (Hochstrasser, 2020) and research endeavors (Radecki & Schonfeld, 2020). In response to RQ1, it can be noted that in this study, based on the information of the communication scholars surveyed, no significant gender differences could be found in terms of academic performance during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the study focuses on the German-speaking community, sociocultural contexts could play a role. The respondents are working under the conditions of the so-called “survivor model,” which was minted in German-speaking countries. It is not only characterized by strong selection principles that are faced by the scholars over many years, but also by a “the winner takes it all” result: In the end, only a few scholars are able to “survive,” which means finding a permanent position in academia (Le Feuvre et al., 2018, pp. 61–63). Thus, we assume that a critical self-assessment is mold-

ing how both men and women experience and articulate the academic working culture. Consequently, they may tend to emphasize that they have underperformed when they self-report to evaluate their own performance, as self-criticism and self-doubt may be their constant companions. Beyond that, however, the data shows that there are gender-specific differences: On the one hand, female participants reported having spent more time on care and household work during the pandemic. This indicates the persistence of a traditional division of labor (Wimbauer & Motakef, 2020, p. 54) and suggests that female communication scholars identify with both traditional aspects of gender roles and their professional roles. On the other hand, the data show that the increases in care work were higher among men. Thus, the pandemic also worked against the traditional division of labor and established gender roles because male communication scholars invested more time in care work than before. The data indicate that this development was fueled mainly by the fact that parents in particular, regardless of their gender, were affected by the pandemic in their working hours and academic output. This finding contrasts with other studies arguing that particularly mothers have faced inequality (Deryugina et al., 2021; Martucci, 2021; Squazzoni et al., 2021). As a result of school and daycare closures, the pandemic, thus, promoted gender equality among communication scholars who are raising children—but not gender equality among communication scholars in general. It led to fathers investing more additional time in care work relative to mothers and, thus, catching up, while mothers, however, spent more time on care work in absolute hours both before and after the outbreak of the pandemic. This can also be assumed as one reason why male communication scholars raising children stated significantly more often than their female colleagues that

Table 6. Relationship between the gender and scope of employment of the partner.

	Respondents working full-time with partner and children	
	Male (n = 41)	Female (n = 32)
Partner’s scope of employment: up to 50%	51.2%	12.5%
Partner’s scope of employment: 50%–75%	24.4%	15.6%
Partner’s scope of employment: 76%–100%	24.4%	71.9%

Note: $p = .001$.

they did not meet their publication goals: since they had planned according to their working conditions before the pandemic, they may have been confronted with having achieved less than expected—a circumstance that was probably already familiar to female communication scholars with children before the pandemic because of the gendered structures that generally shape academic work (Bender et al., 2022).

Another insight that this study has produced is that it is important to consider contextual factors, such as the relationship status, parenthood, and employment scope of the partner. In this respect, gender inequalities also emerged, for example, when it came to female communication academics raising children and working full-time. Compared to their male colleagues, they were more likely to have a partner who also worked full-time and, thus, had a comparatively limited possibility of delegating care work to a partner who was employed to a lesser extent. In other words, full-time working mothers are impacted and burdened more than full-time working fathers. The study's intersectional approach generally underlines that it is not sufficient to merely compare gender differences but to differentiate according to other factors, especially the relationship status and parenthood because inequalities evolve in the combination of two or more of these characteristics and in an act of constantly doing gender (West & Zimmermann, 1987).

The study also provides evidence that broader backgrounds, contexts, and general conditions play a crucial role. Our results are consistent with other findings from the social sciences that have also found only small gender differences in research activity during the pandemic (Skinner et al., 2021). However, a lot of the research on the gendered impact of the pandemic in academia relates to natural science disciplines, where work and research are different (e.g., laboratory setting, working with machines, attendance requirements) from the social sciences and humanities. Disciplinary specificities in relation to the generation of academic output and the prevailing reputation regime should, therefore, be given special consideration in future studies.

Further in-depth research is also needed on country specifics, on the one hand, regarding the structures of universities and the education system, and, on the other hand, regarding the implementation and enforcement of containment measures. It must be acknowledged that there are differences between regions and countries and their timeline and severity of Covid-19-related restrictions that influence individual loads and perceptions of burden and impact on scholarly work. Additionally, the university systems in Switzerland, Austria, and Germany are not fully comparable, leading to different structural challenges and varying forms of support and resources offered in crisis situations. A comparative study by Abramo et al. (2021, p. 9) highlights gender differences in the impact of the pandemic and concludes that women in France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Switzerland are more "affected" than men. By contrast, male scholars

in Germany and Spain feel stronger effects on their academic output than women. Concerning RQ2, the present study found no significant national differences in either increases in care work or decreases in academic performance across the three countries studied. However, it clearly shows country-specificities regarding institutional support services and, thus, suggests that their impact and scope should be investigated in more detail in follow-up studies using appropriate research designs. Further transnational studies, also in German-speaking countries, are also necessary because our case numbers in Austria and Switzerland were quite small and comparability is, therefore, limited.

7. Conclusion

While the study at hand offers valid and reliable results, there are certain limitations. The first limitation to mention is the lack of generalizability of the study. The population of this study was composed of academics who are members of professional associations in the three German-speaking countries of Switzerland, Germany, and Austria. Secondly, the timeframe for self-reflections on the pandemic's impact was focused on the first two "waves" (or 15 months) of the Covid-19 outbreak, therefore, generalizations relating to the long-term effects on academic output cannot be made.

Self-report answers are potentially exaggerated or biased. In our case, respondents may have been embarrassed to disclose threats and burdens in the way and intensity they felt them. Or the threats and limitations due to the pandemic might have been presented as more impactful because it became commonplace to feel "restricted" at the time of the pandemic. Furthermore, because of the cross-sectional nature of the data, we are unable to identify temporal trends or links between specific restrictions and impacts because we determined both simultaneously. The sample itself had a larger number of female respondents, which had been taken into consideration in the statistical analysis.

However, despite these constraints, the article offers a lot of potential for follow-up studies. It seems, for example, urgent to complement the data presented here on the impact of Covid-19 on academics with a qualitative study that seeks to understand the stressors, perceptions of additional stress, and resources offered better. Exploratory insights are needed to comprehend more fully the variations around the objective and subjective burden, the impact itself, and perceptions of the impact of regulations and restrictions, such as lockdowns, as well as potential spill-over effects from the overlap of working at home and caregiving responsibilities. Resources offered by employers, the community, family, and friends also need to be evaluated in terms of how much they are taken on and valued. Altogether, the study shows that the consequences of the pandemic for communication scholars identified as female and for those who are raising children should be taken

into account in future performance evaluations and the assessment of academic age.

Acknowledgments

Data collection and analysis were gratefully supported by grants from the Austrian Society for Communication Studies (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Kommunikationswissenschaft [ÖGK]), the German Communication Association (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft [DGPK]) as well as the University of Rostock. The authors would like to say a special thank you to Felicitas Ilge and Andreas Röser for their tremendous support in preparing the data. In addition, sincere thanks are extended to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable revision comments.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Article

Knowledge Gap Hypothesis and Pandemics: Covid-19 Knowledge, Communication Inequality, and Media Literacy in Lebanon

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Submitted: 13 July 2022 | Accepted: 14 November 2022 | Published: 28 February 2023

Abstract

The study examines the knowledge gap hypothesis during the Covid-19 pandemic in a country experiencing severe social, political, and economic turmoil and inequality. The research design assesses Covid-19 knowledge through 13 variables and incorporates income, education, gender, and media literacy among the socioeconomic status variables. It also includes television exposure, social media exposure, and social media posting as media use measures. A cross-sectional survey of adults living in Lebanon was implemented between March 27 and April 23, 2020. The study aimed for a nationally representative probability sample of 1,536 participants (95% CI, $\pm 2.5\%$) and received 792 valid responses (51.6% response rate). The results show a positive relationship between Covid-19 knowledge and education, media literacy, and social media exposure, but no relationship between Covid-19 knowledge and income, gender, television exposure, and social media posting behavior. The evidence shows a widening of the knowledge gap for those more likely to post on social media and a narrowing of the knowledge gap for those more exposed to social media news, but the observed narrowing of the knowledge gap for television exposure was not statistically generalizable. Finally, the evidence shows that media literacy maintains the knowledge gap by almost identically increasing the knowledge level for both low and high socioeconomic groups, although the limitations in measuring media literacy merit further exploration.

Keywords

communication inequality; Covid-19 pandemic; health communication; knowledge gap hypothesis; media literacy

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps” edited by Margreth Lünenborg (Freie Universität Berlin), Miriam Siemon (Freie Universität Berlin), and Wolfgang Reißmann (Freie Universität Berlin).

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1. Introduction

Covid-19 caused immense loss of life and wealth and resulted in global disruptions at scales not experienced in decades. Like previous health emergencies, those at the margins of society suffered disproportionately from the disease (Viswanath et al., 2020). Socioeconomic inequalities and structural discrimination have historically prevented marginalized communities from accessing quality healthcare, safe living quarters, proper education, and essential conditions for protecting themselves during health crises (Braveman et al., 2011; House & Williams, 2000). Such inequalities manifested themselves through higher Covid-19 mortality and morbidity rates among racial minorities, migrants, and lower-income classes

(Greenaway et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2021; Yaya et al., 2020). Associated with these systematic material inequalities are disparities in reaching quality health information, yet “virtually no attention has been paid to the issue of inequalities in communication and how they may have widened the divides and exacerbated the structural inequities” (Viswanath et al., 2020, p. 1743). The ubiquity of false health information on social media only exacerbated the situation.

The Covid-19 pandemic subsumed media attention and amplified what the World Health Organization (2020) called infodemics—misinformation and disinformation rapidly spreading on social media associated with transmission patterns, resistance to vaccination, and less knowledge about the disease (Pierri et al., 2022; Sallam

et al., 2020; Siddiquea et al., 2021). Nevertheless, credible media and information sources played a critical role in helping mitigate the viral spread (Sun et al., 2021), particularly because people rely on trusted information sources during crises (Van Aelst et al., 2021).

However, access to such information is not uniform across different groups, which has led to gaps in knowledge across social strata (Tichenor et al., 1970). The knowledge gap hypothesis suggests that when mass-mediated information is introduced into a social system, the higher socioeconomic status segments are likely to access and grasp this information faster than those of lower socioeconomic status, thereby widening the gap between groups (Tichenor et al., 1970). Unless communication campaigns intentionally disseminate information equally to various socioeconomic segments, a knowledge gap will arise, which will impede efforts to limit the spread of a disease (Ho, 2012).

Recent studies have shown that knowledge about Covid-19 symptoms, causes, transmission, and prevention was associated with positive health behavior, including vaccine acceptance, despite previous and recent literature questioning the strength of this relationship and explaining it through mediating variables (Bono et al., 2021; Ho, 2012; Iorfa et al., 2020; Viswanath et al., 2006). Recent meta-analyses have reported relatively high levels of good Covid-19 knowledge globally—in most cases more than 75% of the surveyed populations (Saadatjoo et al., 2021; Siddiquea et al., 2021), but most of these studies may have under-sampled underprivileged communities (Siddiquea et al., 2021). Therefore, this study aims to test the knowledge gap hypothesis by examining the public's Covid-19 knowledge levels and investigating how media behaviors may have helped widen or narrow the knowledge gap between different socioeconomic groups, as defined by gender, income, education, and media literacy.

The significance of the study lies in its application of the knowledge gap hypothesis to a country stark with its inequalities, particularly during the pandemic (Melki et al., 2022). Covid-19 reached Lebanon amid social, political, and economic turmoil. The country was experiencing a popular uprising, a severe economic crisis, hyperinflation, a governmental collapse, and a major explosion that devastated its capital. The currency suffered a 96% devaluation and unemployment surpassed 50%, all while Lebanon hosted 1.5 million refugees and suffered indirectly from regional conflicts (Kozman & Melki, 2018; Melki & Kozman, 2020). Despite that, Lebanon successfully mitigated the pandemic through effective strategic communication and collaboration between its government, media institutions, and private and public sectors. The country's chronically divided government and partisan media atypically unified their efforts to focus public attention on fighting Covid-19 by depoliticizing the disease, countering misinformation, and quickly diffusing accurate health information (Melki et al., 2022). Despite scarce resources and dire circumstances, Lebanon out-

did many rich and stable countries in mitigating the disease. The outcome of its response materialized in one of the lowest case counts and test positivity rates globally, and the effort received international accolades for successfully mitigating the disease in the early phase of the pandemic and up until the devastating Beirut port explosion (Khoury et al., 2020). Therefore, Lebanon's multiple-crises situation provides a unique case where a starkly disparate population faced severe economic deprivation and political instability. Thus, the successful mitigation plan could be confidently attributed to communication efforts that informed the public.

Prior to Covid-19, few studies examined the knowledge gap hypothesis within a pandemic (Ho, 2012). Even fewer studies covered the Arab region and the Global South (Melki et al., 2021, 2022), despite renewed interest in examining communication inequalities associated with health inequalities (Viswanath et al., 2020). This study applies knowledge gap research for the first time in Lebanon, and in addition to the typically used socioeconomic status variables (education and income), it also examines gender and media literacy, two variables often ignored. Furthermore, the study includes legacy media exposure and social media exposure, as well as social media posting, a ubiquitous media behavior rarely examined in such contexts.

2. Literature Review

Knowledge gap research has traditionally used education as a key measure of socioeconomic status, although some scholars also incorporate income (Viswanath et al., 2006; Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996). Most research has found education to be positively associated with public knowledge of various health issues (Pitts et al., 2009; Seng et al., 2004; Slater et al., 2009; Viswanath et al., 2006; Wong et al., 2002). The theory suggests that highly educated individuals possess stronger cognitive structures, which provide stronger abilities to manage communication and a higher drive to seek new information (Viswanath et al., 2006). Indeed, emerging research has established a positive relationship between higher education level and better Covid-19 knowledge (Gerosa et al., 2021; Sallam et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021; Zhong et al., 2020). However, income did not garner consistent results. While some previous studies established a positive relationship (Viswanath et al., 2006), others reported no relationship (Seng et al., 2004). Although we would assume that those with higher income also may have access to quality information and knowledgeable social networks, recent research has been inconclusive and mainly associated income with positive health behavior (Baena-Díez et al., 2020; Irigoyen-Camacho et al., 2020; Lau et al., 2020; Sallam et al., 2020). Therefore, we pose the following hypothesis:

H1a: Education is positively associated with Covid-19 knowledge.

H1b: Income is positively associated with Covid-19 knowledge.

Our era of omnipresent information technology, ubiquitous social media, and prevalent infodemics has heightened the importance of media literacy as a critical pedagogy for educating the public about media effects and information verification (De Abreu et al., 2017). A growing cohort of studies has shown that this pedagogical approach, which aims to instill critical media consumption and production skills, has been effective as an intervention strategy in multiple health situations (Halliwell et al., 2011; Jeong et al., 2012; Melki et al., 2015; Yates, 1999). Emerging research also suggests that media literacy could serve as a long-term preventive strategy for mitigating future pandemics (Melki et al., 2021, 2022; Wong et al., 2021), particularly for marginalized communities (Austin et al., 2021). Therefore, we surmise:

H1c: Media literacy is positively associated with Covid-19 knowledge.

Research about gender and Covid-19 knowledge has returned conflicting findings. While Sultana et al. (2022) reported that women scored higher on Covid-19 knowledge assessments in Bangladesh, Pinchoff et al. (2020) found the opposite in India, and Marudachalam et al. (2022) found no significant gender differences in the same country. Knowledge gap research that includes gender comparisons remains rare (Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996), and officials often fail to consider gender-sensitive content and media that effectively target women (Anhang et al., 2004; Chhetri & Lepcha, 2022). Furthermore, higher Covid-19 mortality and morbidity rates among men are attributed to economic, cultural, and lifestyle factors (Bwire, 2020; Jin et al., 2020), but could knowledge also partially explain this phenomenon? Since gender discrimination and gendered media practices, despite their global ubiquity (Byerly, 2013), vary between countries, and are quite pronounced in Lebanon and the Arab region (Melki & Hitti, 2020), it is essential to assess if gender was related to Covid-19 knowledge. Therefore, we ask:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between gender and Covid-19 knowledge?

During pandemics, the media become the main source of information for society (Ho, 2012). Initial media coverage of a disease often attracts intense public attention, which dissipates later as the disease gets under control (Ho et al., 2007). Studies have established that media exposure enhanced the public's knowledge and awareness of health issues, despite significant gaps in knowledge among various marginalized groups (Seng et al., 2004; Wong et al., 2002). Research shows that different media affect health knowledge differently. While television tends to be effective with the general public,

print media are more effective with high socioeconomic groups and elite audiences, but "findings on channel influence and the knowledge gap are inconclusive and suggest needed areas of study" (Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996, p. 202).

Recent studies continue to reflect mixed findings. Gerosa et al. (2021) found that exposure to radio, print, and social media was associated with lower Covid-19 knowledge in the US, while television showed no significant relationship. Wang et al. (2021, p. 4), however, found that none of the legacy media had a relationship with knowledge, while "internet media" was positively associated with knowledge in China. In contrast, Granderath et al. (2021) found social media had a negative association, while television and newspapers had no relationship with Covid-19 knowledge in Germany. Since the amount of coverage, the news framing, and the narratives journalists employ are associated with individuals' attention and awareness of the diseases covered in the media (Ho et al., 2007; Shih et al., 2008), it is plausible that these contradictory findings are related to how Covid-19 was covered in each country. Studies show various governments and media, especially in the US, engaged in politicizing the disease, which may have led ideologized groups to adopt unscientific beliefs and conspiracy theories (Cinelli et al., 2020; Zarocostas, 2020). Since Lebanon's government, health officials, and public and private media provided a highly consistent communication strategy, we predict:

H2a: Television exposure is positively associated with Covid-19 knowledge.

H2b: Social media exposure is positively associated with Covid-19 knowledge.

In addition to facilitating information consumption, social media allow information production and dissemination, but past research has focused mainly on assessing the former media behavior. Emerging research has established a relationship between social media posting and health awareness and behavior, including those related to sun-safety measures for skin cancer protection (Nabi et al., 2019) and alcohol consumption (Alhabash et al., 2021). Although "there is some evidence that posting online affects self-concept, little is known about to what extent it influences the self: Does posting online predict future attitudes, intentions, and behaviors, or just general self-concept?" (D'Angelo et al., 2015, p. 60). Therefore, we inquire whether those more likely to post on social about Covid-19 are also more knowledgeable about the disease:

RQ2: Is social media posting associated with Covid-19 knowledge?

The chief argument of the knowledge gap hypothesis is that individuals from various socioeconomic segments obtain, understand and retain health information from

different communication channels differently (Tichenor et al., 1970). Previous studies suggested that television either narrows or maintains the knowledge gap between high and low socioeconomic groups, while print and online media often increase the knowledge gaps, given television's broad audience and the latter's elite orientation (Boukes & Vliegthart, 2019; Kwak, 1999; Lind & Boomgaarden, 2019; Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996). However, research on media platform effects remains inconclusive and may be influenced by various geographic, political, and social factors (Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996). For instance, research has shown that the knowledge gap tended to decrease with intensified coverage, controversy, and topics of national concern (Kwak, 1999; McLeod & Perse, 1994; Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996), all of which are conditions that apply to the pandemic.

Covid-19 research on the knowledge gap hypothesis remains scarce (Viswanath et al., 2020), and the only two recent studies published had inconsistent findings. While Gerosa et al. (2021) found no support for legacy or online news and social media in contributing to the knowledge gap in the US, Wang et al. (2021) found that online media but not legacy media contributed to widening the knowledge gap in China. In line with previous research, our study expects that television will narrow the knowledge gap and social media will widen it. Our study excluded print and radio because Lebanese media during the past decade had major financial problems that led to the closure of most radio stations, and print media stopped distributing during that period (Melki & Kozman, 2020). Therefore, we focus on television and social media, the two main media used during the pandemic (Melki et al., 2022). We surmise:

H3a: The Covid-19 knowledge gap will be smaller for those more exposed to television.

H3b: The Covid-19 knowledge gap will be greater for those more exposed to social media.

H3c: The Covid-19 knowledge gap will be greater for those more likely to post on social media.

Finally, we ask whether media literacy had any influence on the Covid-19 knowledge gap. Media literacy education was only recently introduced to Lebanon and mainly to universities. We suspect that higher socioeconomic groups will benefit disproportionately from it. Therefore, we ask:

RQ3: Does media literacy widen the Covid-19 knowledge gap?

3. Methods

The study uses a cross-sectional researcher-administered survey of adults living in Lebanon between

March 27 and April 23, 2020. Phone surveys were the only viable option, given the social distancing requirements. Although the knowledge gap hypothesis requires measuring knowledge change over time, we assume that before the pandemic Covid-19 knowledge was equally non-existent across socioeconomic groups.

3.1. Sample and Procedure

A sample of 1,536 participants was calculated based on a population of 6 million (95% CI, $\pm 2.5\%$). The probability sample was based on all possible mobile numbers in the country. First, all possible number ranges were acquired from the Telecommunication Ministry. Then, a sampling frame based on the groups of numbers was developed, and the proportion for each group was developed. Finally, a proportional random sample of numbers was selected from each group of phone numbers.

Researchers contacted their designated list of mobile numbers with each being called at least five times. Numbers that did not respond after five calls and invalid numbers were replaced up to twice by adding +1. For those who answered, researchers read the consent form and conducted the survey with consenting respondents, in accordance with IRB protocol LAU.SAS.JM1.20/Mar/2020. Researchers marked those who declined as "refused." Some respondents who accepted to participate but did not complete more than 85% of the questionnaire were removed from the final dataset. The final tally was 792, a 51.6% response rate.

3.2. Instrument and Measurements

The questionnaire comprised 15 close-ended questions, required approximately 12 minutes, and generated 52 variables, 21 of which were used in this study.

Demographic data were collected, including age (1 = <18, 2 = 18–22, 3 = 23–30, 4 = 31–45, 5 = 46–65, 6 ≥ 65), gender (1 = male, 2 = female), education (1 = elementary school or less, 2 = middle school or less, 3 = high school or less, 4 = university or higher), and income (1 = 0, 2 $\leq 750,000$ LBP, 3 = 750,000–1,500,000 LBP, 4 $\geq 1,500,000$ LBP). Participants were also asked whether they received any media literacy training and answered on a 3-point response scale (1 = never, 2 = a bit, and 3 = a lot).

To assess television and social media exposure, participants were asked how often they followed Covid-19 news through these media. Responses were measured on a 4-point scale (1 = never, 4 = often). Using the same response scale, participants were asked how often they posted or shared news about Covid-19 on social media.

Covid-19 knowledge was measured through two series of questions. First, participants were asked to answer "1 = yes" or "2 = no" to the question: "Are the following groups at higher risk of dying from Covid-19?" The list included older people over 65; people with diabetes, heart, or lung diseases; immunodeficient

individuals; smokers; and the following false beliefs that circulated in social media: children younger than eight; Chinese and Iranians; and those with blood type O+. Second, participants were asked if they “can name the main symptoms of Covid-19,” and interviewers were instructed to check any response that matched the following list (without spelling them out): fever, cough, shortness of breath, chest pain, bluish lips or face, and confusion. The questions resulted in 13 variables. The correct answers were added, and the false answers were subtracted, which resulted in a composite variable with a [0–10] range, distributed normally according to Figure 1, with a mean of 4.84 and ($SD = \pm 1.454$).

3.3. Data Analysis

The study used SPSS 26. Descriptive variables were presented as frequencies and percentages. To test the main hypotheses, we used a linear regression model to examine the direct effects of the independent variables

(TV exposure, social media exposure, and social media posting) on the dependent variable *Covid-19 knowledge*. Using the “enter” method, we entered the demographic variables in block 1, the education and media literacy variables in block 2, and the media variables in block 3. Then, we entered, in block 4, the interaction variables, which were created by multiplying the education variable with each of the media variables to reduce possible multicollinearity. Results were presented as Beta (β) and their corresponding 95% CI. Finally, to assess the statistical significance of the interaction between media literacy and education on Covid-19 knowledge, we ran a two-way factorial ANOVA. Table 1 shows the distribution for gender, age, income, education, and media literacy.

3.4. Limitations

The study faced the following limitations: 27.2% (418) refused to participate, 18.2% (279) of phone numbers were not valid or did not answer despite two

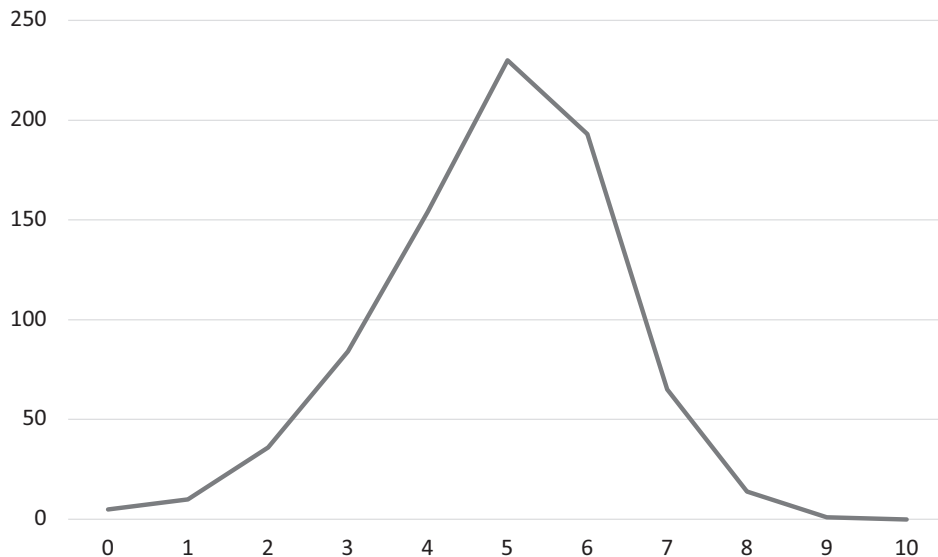


Figure 1. Distribution of Covid-19 knowledge scores ($Mean = 4.84, SD = \pm 1.454$).

Table 1. Sample demographic distribution.

Sample (N = 792)		n (%)
Gender	Men	443 (56.1)
	Women	346 (43.9)
Age	≤30	288 (37.0)
	>30	491 (63.0)
Income (monthly, LBP)	0	39.4 (291)
	<750,000	21.4 (158)
	750,000–1,500,000	20.4 (151)
	>1,500,000–3,000,000	18.9 (139)
Education	< University	477 (62.1)
	University	291 (37.9)
Media Literacy	No	736 (93.0)
	Yes	55 (7.0)

replacements, and 3% (47) did not sufficiently complete the survey. Although the geographic distribution was largely proportional to the actual population, three governorates were somewhat underrepresented and the capital was slightly overrepresented, which reflects that many Lebanese from these areas work and live during the week in Beirut. In addition, men, those older than 30, and those with university degrees were overrepresented: 50.4% of Lebanese are men, 50.3% are older than 30, and 21% hold university degrees (United Nations, 2022). Given the severe economic situation and high unemployment, assessing the representativeness of the income is difficult, but the high percentage of those with no and low income accurately reflect reports that “82% of the population lives in multidimensional poverty” (Lebanon: Almost three-quarters, 2021). While the low level of media literacy poses a threat to the findings, this percentage nevertheless reflects recent studies in Lebanon (Melki & Kozman, 2020). Moreover, the measure of media literacy is admittedly rudimentary and begs the need to develop more sophisticated media literacy measures for future endeavors, particularly for survey methodology. Therefore, findings regarding media literacy should be interpreted with caution, given these limitations. Finally, the 51.6% response rate, while typical for a phone survey, creates some selection bias, which is a standard validity threat in survey methodology.

4. Results

Table 2 shows the results of the linear regression analysis predicting Covid-19 knowledge. The total model explains 16.2% of the variance in the dependent variable. When it comes to gender, age, and income, the results show no significant association with Covid-19 knowledge. Although both gender ($\beta = 0.081, p < 0.05$) and income ($\beta = 1.77, p < 0.01$) present significant positive correlations alone, they both become not significant once education and media literacy are entered. Therefore, H1b, which predicts a positive relationship between income and Covid-19 knowledge is not supported. In addition, gender (RQ1) is not associated with Covid-19 knowledge.

However, both education ($\beta = 0.47, p < 0.01$) and media literacy ($\beta = .1, p < 0.01$) return significant positive correlations with Covid-19 knowledge. Therefore, H1a, which predicts a correlation between education and Covid-19 knowledge, and H1c, which predicts the same relationship with media literacy education, are supported.

As for the media variables, social media exposure has a significant positive relationship ($\beta = 0.274, p < 0.01$), while television exposure and social media posting are not significant. Therefore, H2b, which predicts that social media exposure is associated with Covid-19 knowledge, is supported, but H2a, which predicts the same for television is not supported. Furthermore, RQ2, which asks whether social media posting is associated with Covid-19 knowledge is also not supported.

More importantly, the interaction between education and social media exposure returns a significant negative relationship ($\beta = -434, p < 0.01$), and the interaction between education and social media posting returns a significant positive value ($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.01$), but the interaction between education and television is not significant.

Figure 2 shows the interaction between television exposure and education on Covid-19 knowledge. Among those who have higher education, knowledge scores remain virtually the same for high and low television exposure. But for the low education group, the knowledge score jumps by 0.43 points between television exposure groups. However, the data cannot be generalized statistically. Therefore, H3a, which predicts the knowledge gap will be smaller for those more exposed to television, is not supported.

Figure 3 shows the interaction between social media exposure and education on Covid-19 knowledge. Among those who have higher education, knowledge scores remain virtually the same for high and low social media exposure. But for the lower education group, the knowledge score jumps by 0.17 points for the high social media exposure group. Therefore, H3b, which predicts the knowledge gap will be greater for those more exposed to social media, is not supported. In fact, the data show a statistically significant narrowing of the knowledge gap and an increase in Covid-19 knowledge for those in the lower education category.

Figure 4 shows the interaction between social media posting and education on Covid-19 knowledge. Among those with higher education, knowledge scores increase by 0.24 points between low and high social media posting categories. But for the lower education group, the increase in knowledge score between the high and low social media posting categories is only 0.16 points. Therefore, H3c, which predicts the knowledge gap will be greater for those more likely to post on social media, is supported with caution. Given that the difference (0.08) is quite small, we can also claim a maintenance rather than an increase in the knowledge gap.

Figure 5 shows the interaction between education and media literacy on Covid-19 knowledge. Among those with higher education, knowledge scores increase by 0.71 points between the no media literacy and the media literacy categories. Almost identically, the knowledge score for the lower education group increases by 0.74 points. However, as mentioned previously, findings regarding media literacy should be interpreted cautiously, given the rudimentary measurement used.

Table 3 shows the two-way factorial ANOVA assessing the statistical significance of this interaction. Education returned a significant value ($F(1) = 17.81, p < 0.01$), and so did media literacy ($F(1) = 13.89, p < 0.01$), which reconfirms that education and media literacy have independent effects on Covid-19 knowledge. However, the interaction between education and media literacy was not significant, which suggests that the effect of media

Table 2. Linear regression analysis to test the direct effects of the independent variables on Covid-19 knowledge.

	Zero-order	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
		β [95% CI]	β [95% CI]	β [95% CI]	β [95% CI]
<i>Block 1: Demographics</i>					
Gender	0.044	.081 [3.87, 4.93] *	0.057 [-0.037, 0.371]	0.049 [-0.063, 0.347]	0.051 [-0.055, 0.354]
Age	-0.043	-0.066 [-0.18, 0.008]	0.005 [-0.086, 0.099]	.01 [-0.082, 0.107]	.011 [-0.080, 0.11]
Income	0.149 **	1.77 [0.11, 0.27] **	.051 [-0.025, 1.36]	0.039 [-0.039, 0.124]	0.041 [-0.037, 0.126]
Incremental R ² (%)		3.3			
<i>Block 2: Education & Media Literacy</i>					
Education	0.355 **		0.32 [0.349, 0.557] **	0.313 [0.339, 0.549] **	0.47 [0.174, 1.16] **
Media Literacy	0.174 **		0.112 [0.247, 1.037] **	0.106 [0.207, 1.001] **	0.1 [0.178, 0.969] **
Incremental R ² (%)			11		
<i>Block 3: Media Exposure & Uses</i>					
Television Exposure	0.01			0.033 [-0.058, 0.164]	0.028 [-0.285, 0.375]
Social Media Exposure	0.087 **			0.021 [-0.068, 0.127]	0.274 [1.21, 6.45] **
Social Media Posting	0.146 **			0.064 [-0.011, 0.216]†	-0.063 [-0.311, 0.109]
Incremental R ² (%)				0.6	
<i>Block 4: Interactions</i>					
Education × TV Exposure	0.291 **				0.023 [-0.096, 0.111]
Education × Social Media Exposure	0.282 **				-0.434 [-0.229, -0.04] *
Education × Social Media Posting	0.337 **				0.21 [0.014, 0.265] *
Incremental R ² (%)					1.3
Total R ² (%)					16.2

Note: † p = 0.07, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01.

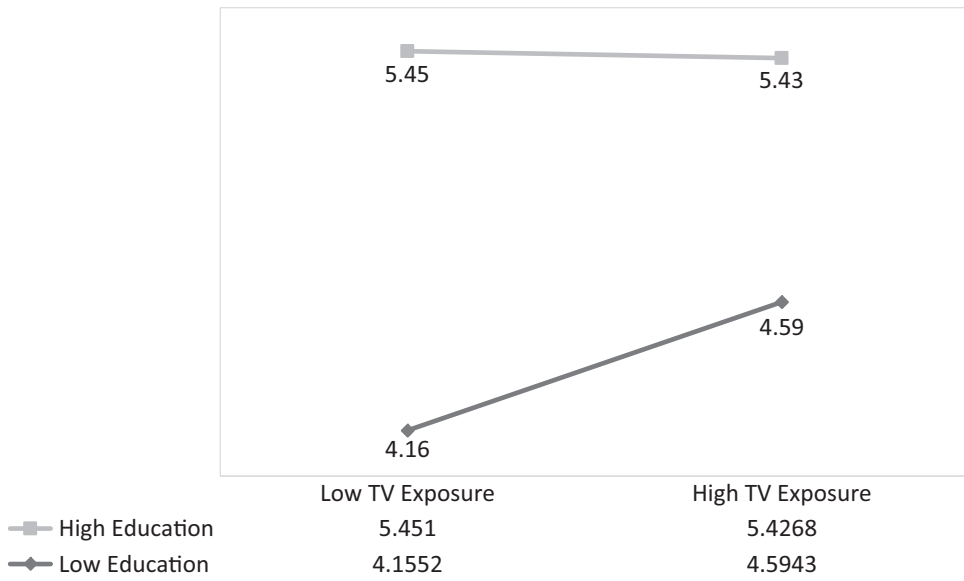


Figure 2. Interaction between education and Television exposure on Covid-19 knowledge: Covid-19 knowledge score [0–10] across education and television exposure levels.

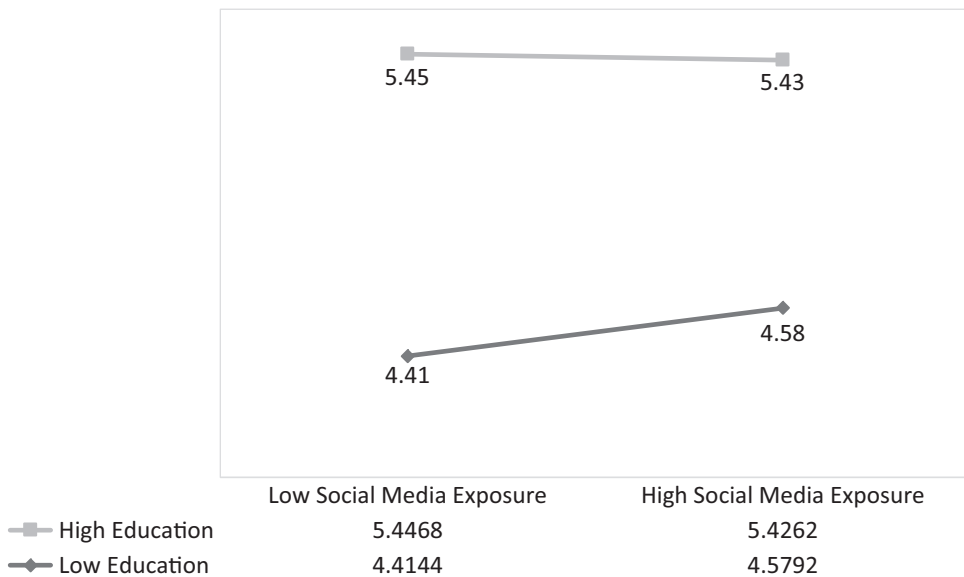


Figure 3. Interaction between education and social media exposure on Covid-19 knowledge: Covid-19 knowledge score [0–10] across education and social media exposure levels.

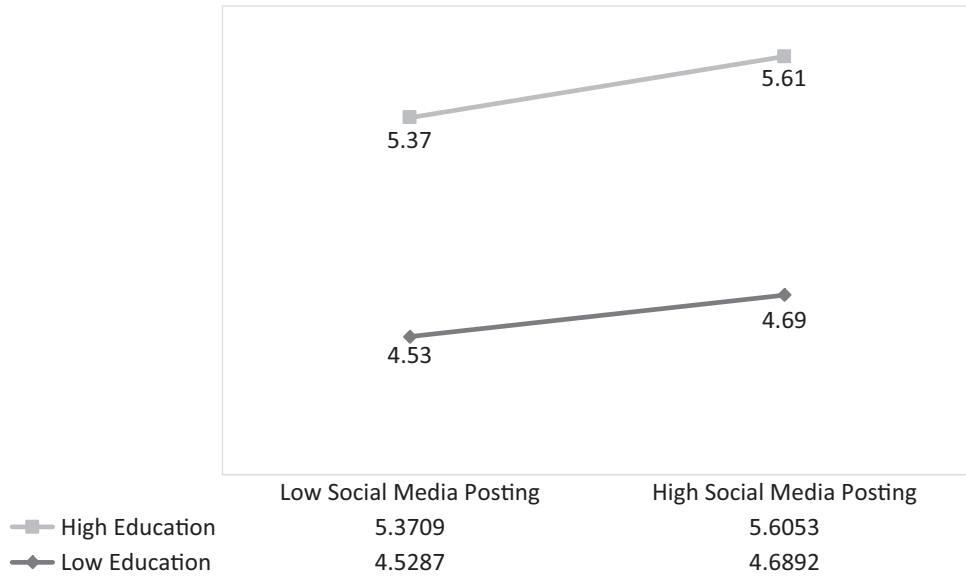


Figure 4. Interaction between education and social media posting on Covid-19 knowledge: Covid-19 knowledge score [0–10] across education and social media posting levels.

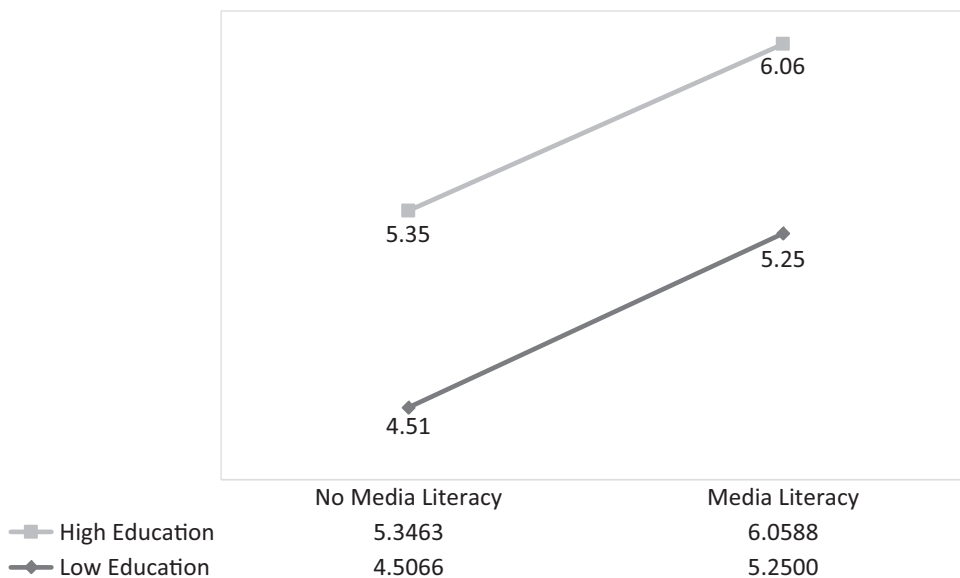


Figure 5. Interaction between education and media literacy on Covid-19 knowledge: Covid-19 knowledge score [0–10] across education and media literacy.

Table 3. Two-way factorial ANOVA for testing the significance of the interaction between education and media literacy on Covid-19 knowledge score.

Predictor	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Corrected Model	169.442 ^a	3	56.481	31.64	0.00
Intercept	5,237.893	1	5,237.893	2,934.74	0.00
Education	31.788	1	31.788	17.81	0.00
Media Literacy	24.794	1	24.794	13.89	0.00
Education x Media Literacy	0.011	1	0.011	0.006	0.94
Error	1,361.792	763	1.785		

literacy and education is the same for low and high socioeconomic groups, as reflected in the almost identical increase in Covid-19 knowledge scores. In other words, while education and media literacy both independently increase the knowledge scores, media literacy does not necessarily help close the knowledge gap, since the increase for both high and low-education groups is identical. Therefore, the answer to RQ3 is that media literacy maintains the knowledge gap while increasing the knowledge level for both low and high socioeconomic groups, a finding that should be cautiously interpreted, given the limitations in measuring media literacy.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the knowledge gap hypothesis during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in Lebanon, a country that was experiencing multiple crises. The findings show a positive relationship between Covid-19 knowledge and education, media literacy, and social media exposure, but no relationship between Covid-19 knowledge and income, gender, television exposure, and social media posting. The evidence supports a widening of the knowledge gap for those more likely to post on social media, but the observed narrowing of the knowledge gap for high television exposure was not statistically generalizable. In addition, data show that social media exposure led to a narrowing of the knowledge gap. Finally, media literacy seems to maintain the knowledge gap, while significantly increasing the knowledge level for both low and high socioeconomic groups, although future research on media literacy should use more sophisticated measures.

These findings continue to add inconsistency to the knowledge gap hypothesis. When it comes to legacy media, our findings are consistent with both Gerosa et al. (2021) and Wang et al. (2021), who found no evidence that legacy media widen the Covid-19 knowledge gap. However, our finding that social media exposure narrows the Covid-19 knowledge gap contradicts Wang et al. (2021), who found that online media contributed to widening the gap, and Gerosa et al. (2021), who found no support for social media contributing to the knowledge gap. Nevertheless, consistent with previous research, education remains a potent indicator for iden-

tifying the knowledge gap (Lind & Boomgaarden, 2019; Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996).

Our two potentially unique findings that social media posting widens and media literacy maintains the knowledge gap between high and low socioeconomic groups merit attention and caution. Both improve the knowledge score for low and high socioeconomic groups, and both seem to be related to each other. Media literacy promotes critical thinking, effective access to information, and analysis of media content; it also empowers individuals with competencies that help to verify Covid-19 misinformation and disinformation (Melki et al., 2021). The growing evidence that media literacy effectively helps in various health issues behooves health communication scholars and public health officials to seriously consider it as a long-term society-wide health intervention strategy (Halliwell et al., 2011; Jeong et al., 2012; Melki et al., 2015; Yates, 1999), particularly for mitigating future pandemics (Melki et al., 2021, 2022; Wong et al., 2021), and countering communication inequality among marginalized communities (Austin et al., 2021). However, scholars should further investigate these claims with more robust media literacy measures and larger media literacy samples. As for social media posting, further examination of individuals who prolifically post on social media is required to discern trends for this understudied media behavior (D'Angelo et al., 2015), particularly given the potential role these individuals may have in spreading false information and conspiracy theories. Emerging research shows that instilling media literacy competencies among such prolific posters may help spread quality information and reduce the uncritical spreading of false posts during health campaigns (Melki et al., 2021). Future research should also confirm the relationship between such high social media engagement and health awareness and behavior for different health issues (Alhabash et al., 2021; Nabi et al., 2019).

Despite rampant gender discrimination in Lebanese laws and social and political institutions and widespread sexism in its media (Melki & Hitti, 2020), our study did not find a significant difference between men's and women's Covid-19 knowledge. This may be explained by the high education rate among women in Lebanon. Across the higher education sector, the majority of students are women, although this does not translate

into the workforce, which is dominated by men, especially at the upper levels of management (Melki & Mallat, 2016). Still, Covid-19 knowledge is not the only concern when it comes to gender, since other studies in Lebanon found that women are more likely than men to believe in Covid-19 misinformation (Melki et al., 2021), which points to a gender gap in news consumption, particularly because women are more likely to avoid news perceived to be created for men (Hart et al., 2009). The unequal domestic burdens for women and exclusion from political and social life also contribute to distracting them from the news (Melki & Hitti, 2020), which is largely political in Lebanon. This gender gap requires further investigation and more sophisticated intersectional gender assessment. Although our study assessed gender within a larger model that incorporated income, age, media literacy, and education, a limitation of this study was its inability to capture intersectional marginalization within racial, sectarian, and geographic subgroups, due to the difficulty of pinpointing these overlapping groups in Lebanon. Future research should adopt an intersectional framework that accounts for multiple overlapping identity lenses beyond gender, including ability, nationality, sexuality, ethnicity, employment status, religious sect, and refugee status, among others (Crenshaw, 1991; Okolosie, 2014). In addition, future research should adopt non-binary measures of gender to capture other gender identities. However, several studies we have recently conducted in Lebanon that include three options for gender (men, women, other) consistently return no values for *other*. This may be due to participants' fear of selecting non-confirmatory options but may also reflect dominant social norms that continue to subscribe to the binary gender division—another matter that media literacy pedagogies can help address.

As for why income also did not relate to Covid-19 knowledge, it is plausible that the severe economic crisis the Lebanese people were facing contributed to this finding (Melki & Kozman, 2020). By the time Covid-19 hit Lebanon, the Lebanese currency had devalued by over 90% and Lebanese people faced sudden hyperinflation. Although the cost of fuel and staples skyrocketed, most media-related costs—including mobile and internet fees—remained constant because the government continued to subsidize them. Perhaps in countries where education is widely and deeply diffused and the cost of access to legacy and new media is low, income does not contribute to the knowledge gap. Still, the finding could be a byproduct of the severe economic crisis, where even those we considered as middle- and upper-income groups were actually reduced to one lower-income group due to the drastic currency devaluation and hyperinflation.

Aside from income, the multiple Lebanese crises, during which this study was conducted, provide an extreme context of social heterogeneity. Various sectarian, political, and ideological divides characterized that country and period.

Research has shown that heterogeneous societies exhibit larger knowledge gaps than homogenous societies (Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996). In complex pluralistic societies, multiple power centers compete for influence, often publicly through media and political institutions. These may lead to differential knowledge centers and communication inequalities. The low mean score for Covid-19 knowledge (4.84/10) may confirm this situation, although Covid-19 unified that society, its media, and its fighting policies, for a short period. A recent study from another conflict zone in Cameroon also pointed to low Covid-19 knowledge levels (Nicholas et al., 2020). Further research in societies undergoing tumultuous change may help pinpoint specific knowledge gaps and help target them with specific communication to improve knowledge.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Eveline Hitti, Dr. Hani Tamim, Ms. Dima Hadid, Ms. Maha Makki, Ms. Sally Farhat, Ms. Jana El Amine, and Ms. Lara Ghandour for their help, advice, and support.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps

Volume 11

Issue 1

2023

Open Access Journal

ISSN: 2183-2439



Edited by Margreth Lünenborg, Miriam Siemon, and Wolfgang Reißmann

Media and Communication, 2023, Volume 11, Issue 1
Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps

Published by Cogitatio Press
Rua Fialho de Almeida 14, 2º Esq.,
1070-129 Lisbon
Portugal

Design by Typografia®
<http://www.typografia.pt/en/>

Academic Editors

Margreth Lünenborg (Freie Universität Berlin)
Miriam Siemon (Freie Universität Berlin)
Wolfgang Reißmann (Freie Universität Berlin)

Available online at: www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication

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MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION
ISSN: 2183-2439

Media and Communication is an international open access journal dedicated to a wide variety of basic and applied research in communication and its related fields. It aims at providing a research forum on the social and cultural relevance of media and communication processes.

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