

Disrupted Delivery: Demythifying Remote and Online Instruction in Times of Crisis and Emergency

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Abstract

This is the guest editors' essay for the Special Issue: *Disrupted Delivery: Remote and Online Instruction in Times of Crisis and Emergency*, Guest Editors: Brigitta R. Brunner & Bruce Mutsvairo.

Keywords

classrooms, curriculum, distance learning, faculty, hybrid courses

Introduction

As cases began surging, countries across the world unveiled different approaches in response to the unforeseen challenges sparked by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Across nations, university closures brought unprecedented disruptions to higher education including severe learning losses, particularly among less affluent countries while others suspended face-to-face instruction with millions thronging to online platforms for e-learning purposes. In many regions of the world that effectively meant overcoming several challenges, including severe internet shutdowns, lack of access, opportunities and tools for digital learning, digital illiteracy for both students and educators along with poor and unstable internet connection for those lucky enough to be connected (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Fishbane & Tomer, 2020; Zalat et al., 2021). But COVID-19 also enabled technological innovations in higher education as shown

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by studies in India (Dhawan, 2020) while further research in Italy (Favale et al., 2020) showed growing opportunities for collaboration among academics as the pandemic grabbed international limelight.

We decided to develop this issue as the pandemic thrust us into historic times. Never before have faculty, students, and administrators been asked to change what they do to make things work so drastically. To say we were forced into uncharted waters is obvious. With a special focus on journalism and mass communication, this issue is dedicated to looking at how faculty and students are managing emergency remote teaching (ERT) and how they navigated increasing online and hybrid teaching and learning endeavors. Ours is an attempt to reflect on the breadth of scholarship and topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as mass communication education giving voice to how faculty and students across the globe are managing in these unprecedented times. Indeed, papers selected for publication in this special issue examine the theoretical and methodological implications for journalism and mass communication education in light of the stormy global pandemic, critiquing not only the factors influencing the direction and speed of extraordinary transitions but also the emerging contested discourses dominating scholarly debates during this inherently uncertain, tumultuous period.

Context

The extremely contagious, novel COVID-19 disease was first detected in Wuhan, Hubei Province, People's Republic of China (PRC) at the end of 2019 (Andersen et al., 2020), becoming the fifth known pandemic since the 1918 flu pandemic (Liu et al., 2020). Its origins have been traced back to animals, most likely bats, before the diffusion to other animals and eventually humans believed to have been at the Huanan wet market in Wuhan City (Chaplin, 2020). Other scientists including Bloom et al. (2021) have also accepted the validity of theories linking the virus to unintended release from a laboratory, notions which the Chinese government has vehemently refuted. COVID-19 continues to have a profound effect on the world including the intense loss of human life, poor health, escalating job losses, which in turn have led, in some cases, to extreme poverty. Everything, including education, at all levels, has been impacted and its immeasurable, cumulative effects on educational systems as well as on students, staff, and faculty at universities and colleges across the world, will be felt forever. From unequal effects of the pandemic on scientists (Myers et al., 2020) to the changing ways in which academics conduct research or deliver lectures (Flores & Swennen, 2020), it is safe to assume no one really knows what the real lasting impact of the pandemic on higher education is.

Like our colleagues in other disciplines, journalism and mass communication faculty and students have had their own share of traumas dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. These range from challenges associated with the lack of guarantees to safety and well-being leading in some instances to severe mental health challenges, attempting to generate new knowledge or promoting teaching and research excellence during a period of uncertainty and calamity, encouraging and in some cases, forcing

unmotivated students to embrace e-learning as a teaching method. During these trying times, the consequences have been dire. While studies in Karachi, Pakistan, have shown a positive attitude to virtual teaching among university faculty members (Akram et al., 2021), research in neighboring India exposed safety concerns associated with online learning with the rise of child abuse and domestic violence during the government-enforced locked-down becoming the biggest obstacle for digital pedagogy (Ravichandran & Shah, 2020). In response to the adversity, universities across the world started to adopt various learning strategies including blended learning, defined as an integration of face-to-face and online instruction (Graham et al., 2013) or asynchronous online learning, which offers interactive learning opportunities unconstrained by geography or time (Khan, 2005) and synchronous learning mechanisms, which provide real-time interaction between simultaneously present students and faculty (Perveen, 2016). Even as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2021) estimates that about 1.57 billion students globally are directly or indirectly bearing the brunt of COVID-19, it is safe to assume that many in journalism and mass communication and indeed other disciplines had never encountered terms such as “asynchronous learning” before the pandemic took center stage. But the stakes remain high, meaning many have been forced to hastily adapt rather than putting their jobs on the line.

Recent research shows that despite the COVID-19 quagmires, journalism education at Jakarta Indonesia’s Dr. Press Institute Soetomo (LPDS), a national center for journalism training, is thriving, taking advantage of the continued online offerings (Mustika & Khotimah, 2021). Calling the pandemic a “catalyst” (p.4), United Kingdom-based researchers Fowler-Watt et al. (2020) also highlight the opportunities for journalism education including the uncovering of innovative ways of teaching arguing before the pandemic many had not considered these approaches while Russian research measuring the effectiveness of online education for media students during the pandemic showed online teaching presented severe challenges particularly in relation to protracted communication concerns between students and faculty (Poluekhtova et al., 2020). Critically, more debates on the future of journalism research have emerged in the wake of the pandemic. For example, Lewis (2020) calls for rethinking of objects, referring to what researchers study and the objectives behind their engagements, adding that “epistemic humility” was missing from current approaches to the field. In a response to Lewis’ appeal, Raetzsch et al. (2021, p. 4) argue against a mass scholarly reorganization of the field stressing rather the need to “enliven and expand the debate, sustaining the exhortations for more inclusivity and diversity in journalism studies.”

ERT Global Perspectives

COVID-19 soon took over higher education in 2020. Hong Kong was one of the first nations to move its educational entities online in late January 2020 (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021). By April 2020, nearly every college and university in the world had turned to online offerings. For most educators, this quick transition to online education was unprecedented. While Australian universities had some experience with ERT

because of the bushfires of 2019/2020 (Lim, 2020), few other institutions did. And, to make it even more challenging, never had the entire world turned to online education at the exact same moment.

While at first, many thought the transition to remote learning would be temporary, it was soon found that the move back to in-person classes would be both challenging and longer than hoped. The actions taken by universities to keep courses going while keeping faculty, staff, and students safe was likened to an experiment by Tanga et al. (2020). The quickness with which this transition took place and the fear of the pandemic were like nothing ever before experienced (Green et al., 2020). No one in the world was prepared (Wang, 2021).

With this transition, we also learned about inadequacies in education firsthand. For example, in Iraq, many students and faculty did not have email accounts, and those who did often found their internet signals were weak at best (Coutts et al., 2020). In South Africa, the differences between rural universities and those who catered mainly to white students previously came to the forefront (Tanga et al., 2020). Even in the United States, the discrepancies between the haves and the have-nots was obvious. Yet in other nations, such as Bahrain, there were few difficulties and most students and faculty had access to working internet (Coutts et al., 2020). Still others, such as Japan, are considering how to adapt and make online-remote learning part of typical offerings (Saito, 2020 as cited by Nae, 2020).

ERT is not the same as online or distance learning (Hodges et al., 2020). ERT is designed to respond to a crisis situation, and it is not thoughtfully planned and coordinated as a true online course would be (Hodges et al., 2020). ERT is quick and temporary instruction during a crisis (Hodges et al., 2020; Lorenza & Carter, 2021; Whittle et al., 2020). Redesigning what was planned as a face-to-face and in-person course to an online format is a complex process that considers how knowledge would be disseminated including the order and rate (Green et al., 2020). However, educators in 2020 did not have such luxuries. In addition to being thrown into remote teaching without time to prepare and often without resources, faculty were also asked to manage these expectations while also managing children and spouses at home, caring for elderly relatives, and worrying about their own health and safety (Green et al., 2020). However, faculty took on this challenge without squabbling and without the benefit of training (Kerres, 2020).

Some faculty describe their experiment with ERT and online teaching as exciting as they learned new skills and thrived in this new environment; others described the situation as one of survival that left them questioning their abilities and competence (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021). However, nearly all faculty admit that ERT and online teaching took much more time and effort than in-person teaching (Crick et al., 2020; Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021; Zapata-Garibay et al., 2021). They also find working on Zoom and with other technology to be more tiring (Sklar, 2020), and others worried about the increased workload and teaching effectiveness (Crick et al., 2020). However, despite the amount of time put into redeveloping courses, there is the perception that online teaching was somehow less than teaching in person (Coughlan, 2020) and some students thought they should pay less for online offerings because they thought it was

easier to do (Coutts et al., 2020). However, faculty, administrators and students need to remember the quality of teaching is more important than how things are delivered (EEF, 2020 as cited in Crick et al., 2020). Also, everyone needs to remember learning does not only happen in the classroom, it can happen during times outside of class as students exchange ideas or think about their classes (Gourlay & Oliver, 2018).

Students have also been affected by ERT and other changes to a normal college experience. To cope with this disruption, many students developed adaptive behaviors. Adaptive behaviors can be both positive and negative (A. I. Martin et al., 2013). Positive adaptive behaviors would include persistence, planning, and time management skills (Liem & Martin, 2012). Negative adaptive behaviors are disengagement and self-sabotage (Liem & Martin, 2012). Due to the circumstances of the pandemic, some students have felt isolated which has the potential for learning loss, disengagement, and reduced well-being (Drane et al., 2020; Flack et al., 2020). Also, the absence of belonging can be strong for some students who were learning virtually rather than face-to-face (Phelan, 2012). While some students also had the additional learning curve to adjust to new technology (Whittle et al., 2020), many suffered from lacking the self-discipline and engagement necessary to succeed in online learning (Coutts et al., 2020). However, not everything about ERT and virtual learning during the pandemic was negative. Some researchers have found that students said there was more cooperation, collaboration, and connection between themselves and other students and faculty because online teaching transcends instruction (Sali, 2020 as cited in Lorenza & Carter, 2021). Others say that students felt they not only gained additional perspective by interacting with other students on Zoom, but they also had more individualized help from their instructors (Lorenza & Carter, 2021). Some students were also noted to have developed more soft skills, took more responsibility, and became more appreciative of attending class (Coutts et al., 2020).

The pandemic was perhaps “the widest experimentation in online education globally” (Ferri et al., 2020, p. 3). It was the first time ERT was used on a global scale (Moorhouse & Konkez, 2021), and it brought to light the global difficulties of employment, health, education, and economics in such times (Lorenza & Carter, 2021). It also allowed for discussions about the inequities of remote teaching and the disparities among between the have and have-nots not only between, but also within, nations (Ferri et al., 2020; Kerres, 2020).

We learned that a lot of mandates about virtual and ERT were top-down and were made with little concern for discipline-specific needs (Crick et al., 2020). We also found that coursework based in case studies and group projects was more difficult if not impossible to make work (Coutts et al., 2020). In addition, clinical and practical work was difficult to manage (Tanga et al., 2020). We also ascertained that different and more technologies had an impact on the learning process (Harris & Hofer, 2017), and to use technology well, faculty needed to be intentional when selecting from the various options (Lock & Redmond, 2021). Furthermore, we realized that we need to use technology to build connection and community (Ferri et al., 2020). In addition, we must provide training on how to use technology, develop ways to assess teaching with technology, and find ways to blend technology with in-person teaching (Ferri et al.,

2020). Furthermore, we have to find ways to provide students with devices and imagine ways to use many technologies, even older ones such as television and radio, to ensure all students have a way to access learning in uncertain times (Ferri et al., 2020). We should also reach out to our professional organizations to find solutions for how to manage applied learning situations (Tanga et al., 2020).

But not all was lost throughout this time. Many faculty learned new skills (Coutts et al., 2020). We found that there are benefits to online learning—reduced travel time, introduction to new resources, the ability for students to revisit lectures and other content, and the ability for students to work at their own pace (Lorenza & Carter, 2021). Faculty banded together often on social media to share their successes and failures and to offer insight to solve common problems or to just lend an ear thus building a virtual community (Coutts et al., 2020). Also, museums and book publishers provided free content and access during this time (Lim, 2020). The pandemic has given us all an opportunity to re-imagine what online education could look like. Perhaps this opportunity allows institutions to imagine, and then develop, what a hybrid university model looks like and that allows more access due to reduced costs (Ferri et al., 2020). Institutions can also find ways to prepare and support faculty psychologically as well as pedagogically and technically so that they feel more motivated and competent with virtual learning (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021). This situation also gives faculty a reason to try a flipped-method approach to teaching so to prepare students for changes in modality if they are needed in the future (Coutts et al., 2020).

Post-Pandemic Paradigms

While scientists are already working in view of a post-pandemic era (May, 2021; Reid et al., 2021), in this period of persistent perplexity and unfathomable, unrelenting pressures, one wonders whether there is an end to the current predicament. With the May 2021 discovery of the C.1.2. variant in South Africa (Winning, 2021) and the accompanying cynicism over the likelihood of achieving herd immunity (Aschwanden, 2021), it is logical to conclude that our future remains uncertain in spite of boundless efforts to vaccinate the world against COVID-19. The pandemic has however offered journalism and mass communication scholars an opportunity to interrogate their work in light of disruptions caused by the outbreak. Several thematic issues including “*Media and Migration in the Covid-19 Pandemic: Discourses, Policies and Practices in Times of Crisis*” (*Media and Communication*), “*COVID-19, the Media, and Communication Scholarship: Adequate Concepts for the Crisis or a Crisis of Concepts?*” (*Annals of the International Communication Association*), “*Covid-19*” (*Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*), “*Covering Corona: News in times of the pandemic crisis*” (*Digital Journalism*), “*COVID-19: Now and Then: Reflections on Mobile Communication and the Pandemic*,” *Mobile Media and Communication* and “*Public Health Communication in an Age of COVID-19*” *Health Communication* are either forthcoming or have just been published. These special issues and several other publications are important in helping highlight some of the theoretical developments emerging in a catastrophic period such as this one. In

the context of this situation, our special issue sought to offer important insights with the view of helping align our understanding of journalism and mass communication research and pedagogy in an era dominated by COVID-19 while also helping us reflect on our own practices as educators and researchers.

We believe that this special issue contributes to knowledge in many ways. First and foremost, the papers in this issue present an interesting geographical mix (uncovering research from Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America), which is important because the pandemic continues to unevenly unfold across disparate geographical regions of the world. It is therefore vital to have a helicopter view on how the pandemic has affected the world community of journalism and mass communication scholars. At a time when every region of the world has witnessed the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic poses, a global worldview is indeed essential. More importantly, like most of our international colleagues scattered across the academe, we are concerned about the future of journalism and mass communication research and teaching. Depending on one's location, several countries have witnessed a fall in student numbers and while the number of PhD graduates continues to rise, there are very few tenure-track positions available for which they can apply. Such a worrying trend should concern all of us because our community of scholars heavily relies on the contributions made by academics and in that regard, the role-played by early career researchers is hugely significant insofar as guaranteeing the sustainability of our field. However, waves of spiraling budget cuts that have dominated journalism and mass communication programs across the world including the United States (Wilderman et al., 2019) and the United Kingdom (Weale, 2021) have left many gravely concerned. Some public universities in the industrialized and economically advanced world have benefited from prevailing government support schemes. Worryingly, some universities located in poorer nations have not had the luxury of state support, forcing several departments to close shop thereby further aggravating existing societal inequalities.

However, the pandemic also offers new opportunities to rethink unrealizable strategies that have dominated the academe for a long time. We hope the pandemic has offered an important window of opportunity for cynicists to see the importance of prioritizing journalism and mass communication research. Take disinformation, an area of research that generally falls under our field, for example. It has captured everyone's attention as it continues to dominate headlines across the world particularly in the aftermath of the December 2019 COVID-19 outbreak. People are understandably turning to social media platforms for sharing and even acquiring knowledge about the pandemic. The lack of accurate information on these platforms has however allowed disinformation to thrive making it possible for example, for people to hold strong antivaccination views or even doubt the existence of COVID-19. Research is henceforth an important component needed in global efforts to fight fake news. It is important for funding agencies and governments to continue supporting projects aimed at combating disinformation because empirical research has the power to offer evidence-based solutions to various misunderstandings and worldwide conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19. In this regard, the pandemic offers real and

meaningful opportunities for change particularly in terms of what governments, universities, and policy-makers should and could prioritize when it comes to funding.

Paper Summaries

Auger and Formentin explore the emotional labor of the pandemic in *"This is depressing: The emotional labor of teaching during the pandemic spring 2020."* The authors use mixed methods to examine how the emotional labor thrust upon faculty and students left them exhausted. Furthermore, they find that gender plays a role in differences in the levels of emotional labor experienced.

In *"How higher education faculty in Egypt perceive the effects of COVID-19 on teaching journalism and mass communication – Perspectives from the Global South,"* Badr and Elmaghraby use both quantitative and qualitative means to examine faculty perceptions of higher education during the pandemic. The results ask readers to consider cultural and regional inequities in digital education.

Coche examines virtual exchange experiences in *"Course internationalization through virtual exchange: Students' reflections about 'seeing the world through the lens that is soccer.'"* Virtual exchange is gaining a foothold in international courses as it allows students to use technology to collaborate with students in other locales. The study's respondents say that their virtual exchange experiences were challenging, but they learned much about cultural difference through them.

In *"Suddenly apart, yet still connected: South African postgraduate journalism students' responses to ERT and learning,"* Jordaan and Groenewald study the student experience with ERT in South Africa. These participants often report difficulty with the transition due to not only the lack of appropriate infrastructure, but also home life situations. It was found that students look to peer support to make it through the difficult time.

Kirschner takes the pandemic as an opportunity to reflect on the student experience during ERT in her article, *"Transparency in online pedagogy: A critical analysis of changing modalities."* In this piece, she challenges faculty to be transparent and communicative in their interchanges with students. She also suggests students need more access to faculty and learning materials in times of ERT, and faculty need to adapt their teaching, materials, and syllabi accordingly. Furthermore, the author says both faculty and students have to be accepting of failure during such a process.

"'Going virtual helped me learn that I can handle everything': Campus magazine production as a high impact practice during the COVID-19 pandemic" by Lance and Reynolds is a case study which examines the effects of virtual learning and instruction on a student magazine staff. The results of this study suggest remote newsrooms can have positive impacts on students' learning experiences, especially during times of crisis. Student participants say their self-efficacy improved as they worked to overcome obstacles similar to those faced by professionals during the pandemic.

LeBlanc investigates the effects ERT had and could have on student teaching evaluations in *"COVID-19 effects on communication course and faculty evaluations."* This study looks at student teaching evaluations during the pandemic. The author notes how

some question the validity of student evaluations in even the best of conditions as he examines teaching evaluations in this unprecedented time.

“*Communication, flexibility and resilience: Navigating the shift to virtual service-learning during COVID-19*” by Reif-Stice and Smith-Frigerio investigate the impact of ERT on faculty and community partners’ experiences. While challenges are plenty, participants also find the transition leads to creativity and resilience. By focusing on flexibility and adaptability, faculty and community partners have the ability to provide students with positive service-learning experiences despite the pandemic.

Workneh and Lin consider the faculty experience of moving to ERT in “*Teaching global communication during COVID-19: Challenges, mitigation, and lessons learned*.” The piece examines what was learned from the quick switch to remote learning. It also looks at how pedagogy could be re-imagined during times of crisis such as pandemics.

Unfortunately, despite gains against the pandemic, low vaccination rates are threatening to cause similar havoc for the foreseeable future. Looking toward the future, our hope is that this issue will establish best practices that current and future educators can reference when they need inspiration or help during trying times.

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