

Editorial

Editorial: Media and Migration in the Covid-19 Pandemic—Discourses, Policies, and Practices in Times of Crisis

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Submitted: 20 June 2022 | Published: 30 June 2022

Abstract

This editorial serves as an introduction to *Media and Communication's* thematic issue “Media and Migration in the Covid-19 Pandemic: Discourses, Policies, and Practices in Times of Crisis.” This thematic issue presents a space for discussion on ways in which digital infrastructures and media have an impact on understandings and experiences of migration during the pandemic. The seven articles in this volume offer an integrated account of this issue from many empirical studies adopting a multi-actor perspective while also involving different methodologies and cross-cultural and interdisciplinary frameworks. The contributions featured in this thematic issue shed new light on the role of mediated processes and discourses around migration and may be of assistance to understanding the opportunities and challenges of leveraging media technologies to promote inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful participation and representation of migrants beyond the pandemic.

Keywords

Covid-19; digital technologies; media and migration; media discourses; migrants

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Media and Migration in the Covid-19 Pandemic: Discourses, Policies, and Practices in Times of Crisis” edited by Vasiliki Tsagkroni (Leiden University), Amanda Alencar (Erasmus University Rotterdam), and Dimitris Skleparis (Newcastle University).

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has been perceived and managed by many states as a mobility issue. Discourses of fear and war-like metaphors around the ongoing health crisis have paved the way for the introduction of unprecedented mobility restrictions at the local, national, and global levels. These measures were introduced at a time when the rights of free movement and settlement of the most vulnerable had been already considerably limited. At the same time, these measures and relevant discourses have all been intensely mediated, shaped through complex media landscapes and imagined by a diversity of social actors, with far-reaching consequences for public attitudes toward migration and their associated processes. The risk of these discourses and mea-

asures further exacerbating the rights and vulnerabilities of migrants, as well as undermining ongoing processes of migrant reception, settlement, and integration is real.

Additionally, during times of crisis, the media are key in contributing to debates over ratification of preventive measures, as well as providing communities, including migrants and refugees, with access to relevant information. Against this background, it is important to highlight barriers related to digital accessibility and literacies, as well as associated risks of technology use (e.g., misinformation, privacy issues, and surveillance), which can prevent refugees, asylum seekers and other forcibly displaced persons from staying up to date on developments in the Covid-19 crisis in their locations of settlement. This not only increases their vulnerability and exacerbates existing inequalities, but also renders them invisible as

a community. Finally, communication and relations in transnational families have also potentially been transformed and challenged, while also being reflected in the digital practices and mobility policies in times of crisis.

This thematic issue of *Media and Communication* focuses on contributions that bring together digital infrastructures and media through the spectre of migration during the Covid-19 crisis. The selected contributions in this thematic issue include themes related to: (a) the role of media discourses around the immediate and long-term effects of the Covid-19 on migrants as well as in facilitating solidarity movements towards migrant groups, or conversely, anti-immigrant mobilizations; (b) the benefits and constraints of digital technologies in risk and crisis management among migrant communities; (c) the opportunities and challenges of using digital technologies to conduct research on migrant populations during a global pandemic; and (d) the impact of media on transnational family relations and communications within the context of limited global mobility. The following section provides a summarized account of the seven articles included in this volume.

2. Presentation of the Contributions in this Thematic Issue

Kaarina Nikunen and Sanna Valtonen (2022) open the thematic issue with an article exploring the digital self-representation of the everyday life of recently or currently undocumented migrants in times of Covid-19 in Finland through a photographic exhibition in collaboration with photographer Katja Tähjä, Helinä Rautavaara Museum, and seven participants from the research project. Informed by the prevalence of digital technologies as an intimate infrastructure the article explores visibility on a dual level: as a position in society and as part of a photographic research method that enhances societal visibility. It also reflects on connections of vulnerability, visibility, and invisibility in digital everyday life. The authors' observations on studying visual images of self-expression of people in precarious life situations show how digital media environments expose these populations to coerced visibility in their constant struggle for communicative rights.

Julia Camargo et al. (2022) also address communication rights in the context of social and digital inequalities aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic by exploring the experiences of Venezuelan refugees in Brazil. The study discusses the growing notion of digital inequalities, characterized by reduced connectivity, and exacerbated (online) vulnerabilities during Covid-19, which are connected to issues of transnational family communication, obtaining, and accessing information, resources, and rights in a host society. The results of the research point to a high level of digital precarity in all three, along with strong exposure to online misinformation, and the lack of communication rights for refugees. Additionally, it is argued that government and humanitarian digital

infrastructures contributed to enhancing social exclusion and marginalization of refugees, while accessing precarious information landscapes online has an impact not only on the well-being and health of refugees but also deters safe pathways to mobility.

Nikos Fotopoulos et al. (2022) explore the salience and framing of the refugee issue in German, Greek, and British media between 1 January 2021 and 1 May 2021. The authors employ qualitative content analysis in a selection of print and online editions of two mainstream, one regional, and one tabloid newspaper from each of the three countries. Their article argues that the pertinent coverage dedicated to Covid-19 and refugees was scarce in the three countries and was overshadowed by epidemiological developments or other health aspects related to local populations. Interestingly, the authors also note that salience varied at both the country and newspaper levels, with centre-left newspapers being more likely to report on the refugee issue than centre-right, regional, or tabloid ones. Moreover, the article finds that the dominant frame in the coverage of the refugee issue amid the pandemic was the "victim" frame. Again, interesting differences are observed at the newspaper level, with centre-left outlets being more likely to show sympathy or empathy towards refugees by acknowledging the challenges that they face in the context of the pandemic.

Thea de Gruchy et al. (2022) explore the ways in which migrant and mobile populations in South Africa were framed in the media as the pandemic unfolded in 2020. The authors undertake a quantitative assessment of outputs produced globally by English language media about Covid-19 and migration in South Africa. This is coupled with a framing analysis that aims to identify how migration and migrants were framed by the media in South Africa. Their findings illustrate that articles published by US- and UK-based outlets had a far greater reach than locally or regionally produced outputs, suggesting that much of the information about, and framing of, migration in the country was not produced locally amid the pandemic. Contra their expectations, the authors also find that the framing of migration as a threat or as detrimental to South Africa was not the dominant one. Rather, migrants were given a human face through the acknowledgement of the difficulties they faced due to the pandemic and the state's inadequate responses to it.

Hanna Orsolya Vincze and Delia Cristina Balaban (2022) explore the main themes and voices that comprised Romanian media coverage of native intra-EU labour migration and the ways in which German media perspectives were integrated into that coverage in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Focusing on the early stage of the pandemic, between 1 March and 30 July 2020, the authors undertake a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of leading Romanian online news outlets. Their findings show that, despite migrants' voices being underrepresented, both Romanian and

German media, to a certain extent, used the pandemic as an opportunity to reflect on the general social costs of migration, and the responsibility of political actors in the home and destination countries, as well as at the EU level. However, the authors also find strong negative overtones, particularly at the later stage of the pandemic (April–July 2020), with Romanian migrants being portrayed as beneficiaries of “privileged” treatment, as they were able to remain mobile while their compatriots had to endure strict lockdown measures.

Hakimu Sseviiri et al. (2022) analyze the daily digital experiences and social connections of urban refugees during the Covid-19 crisis in Uganda. By interviewing refugees and refugee-led organisations, the authors discuss the notion of social capital within refugees and host communities and how it affects digitally mediated responses to livelihoods, social wellbeing, and information access during the pandemic. The findings underline the significant impact of digitally enabled and mediated social networks through bonds, bridges, and links when it comes to coping with crisis effects. The article underscores that while the use of digital social networks in mobilizing support for refugees during the crisis was hampered by a fragmented digital infrastructure, inequalities regarding access to ICTs, inadequate government response, language barriers, and the spread of fake news, digital technologies offer the tools to increase social support and mobilization capacity of refugees.

Svetlana S. Bodrunova and Anna Smoliarova (2022), in the closing article of this thematic issue, examine the coverage of the Russian and EU migration in Russian media during the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors examine how internal and foreign immigrants were treated during the Covid-19 pandemic, to evaluate if, in the face of the pandemic, coverage was fair and humanistic, rather than different and politically motivated. Their analysis of 12 federal and digital media, as well as four TV channels from the year 2020, shows the prevalence of the above-mentioned dualism throughout the pandemic, with pro-state media providing only a modest counterbalance. Overall, the authors’ findings point out that immigration-related concerns faded from public consciousness, particularly in regional media, and the pandemic did not result in a re-humanization of immigration coverage.

About the Authors



Vasiliki Tsagkroni is senior assistant professor of Comparative Politics at the Institute of Political Science at Leiden University. Their main research includes far-right parties, populism, and radicalization, political discourse, narratives in times of crisis, political marketing, and branding and policy making.

3. Conclusion

This thematic issue of *Media and Communication* focuses on the connection of media and migration as a critical lens to think through themes of borders, refugees, integration, governance, and representation associated with this pandemic crisis. The seven contributions featured in this thematic issue have extended our knowledge of the topic and put forward several questions that call for further investigation. Further work will be needed to determine how digital infrastructures and media have shaped migration processes and discourses amidst the pandemic.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Dimitris Skleparis is lecturer in Politics of Security at Newcastle University. His research is at the intersection between critical security studies and migration/refugee studies. Dimitris is interested in how migration is governed, perceived, portrayed, and experienced amid increasing insecurities. He approaches these issues from an interdisciplinary and mixed methods standpoint. He has published in a range of international peer-reviewed journals and has contributed to several edited volumes, research project reports, op-eds, and policy briefs.