COVID-19, the media, and communication scholarship: adequate concepts for the crisis or a crisis of concepts?

Sebastian Scherr [ID] [a,b] and Florian Arendt [ID] [c]

[a]Department of Media, Knowledge, and Communication, University of Augsburg, Augsburg, Germany;
[b]Department of Communication and Journalism, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, USA;
[c]Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic sparked a tremendous interest in the scientific community that not only massively increased scientific output in general (see 'paperdemic'; Valencise et al., 2022; see Lin & Nan, 2022 specifically for Communication). Across the board, some claimed that these publications also included 'faster' case reports, comments, editorials, or letters to the editor (Carvalho et al., 2020) that simultaneously represent the lowest levels of the evidence pyramid with a higher risk of bias (Murad et al., 2016). In Communication, special issues have tackled specific aspects of the global pandemic (e.g. Nan & Thompson, 2021; Ratzan, 2020), and in this special issue of the Annals of the ICA, we aimed at taking the current COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to reflect upon key concepts in Communication. In fast-paced times like these, it seemed relevant to us to take a step back and reflect on whether the most prominent concepts in Communication were, are, and will be helpful to not only address the current challenges still posed by COVID-19, but also future crises.

The four peer-reviewed papers featured in this special issue address important conceptual takeaways from past experiences and provide a perspective for the future taking COVID-19 as an opportunity to reflect about core concepts in communication across the field's subdisciplines. In the first paper (alphabetical order), Holbert et al. discuss the COVID-19 pandemic against the backdrop of four conceptually different, theoretically relevant boundary conditions that are highly informative for theory building. Holbert et al. first introduce external vs. internal as well as hard vs. soft boundary condition types and then discuss how the global COVID-19 pandemic impacted the *Theory of Motivated Information Management* (TMIM; Afifi & Weiner, 2004)*, The Extended Parallel Process Model* (EPPM; Witte, 1994), and *Reactance Theory* (Brehm & Brehm, 1981) as three examples of core theories used in our field. Specifically, they challenge the field's theories by asking how the pandemic set boundaries that will help these models or theories ultimately come out from the pandemic all the stronger.

In the second paper, Muddiman et al. take a fresh look at how indexing theory (Bennett, 2006) helps understanding elite orientation on U.S. TV news networks. The paper addresses some highly important and timely questions, such as if TV news networks would cover elite viewpoints even if the elites were misinformed, and if there are consistent indexing patterns across news networks. Using COVID-19 as a reference point, indexing theory is expanded for developing news environments. Their content analysis of U.S. broadcast and cable news providers shows that news networks indexed the positions of health elites and the U.S. president even when the information presented was misinformed. What stand out is that even when the status quo of health and science information shifted, networks would still use earlier statements to suggest a no longer existing controversy about new knowledge. Besides important practical implications for journalists and science communication

CONTACT Sebastian Scherr   sebastian.scherr@uni-a.de   Department of Media, Knowledge, and Communication, University of Augsburg, Augsburg, Germany; Department of Communication and Journalism, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4234, USA

in the paper, a key takeaway is that indexing theory could profit from integrating the factor time into disagreements presented in developing news.

In the third paper, Ratcliff et al. present a scoping review of the predominant theories and concepts used to manage uncertainty in public communication in the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic (January 2020 – February 2022). The scoping review includes a total of $N = 60$ empirical ($n = 39$) and non-empirical ($n = 21$) papers published during this time and shows that only half of the empirical studies and barely any of the non-empirical papers used a specific theory to examine uncertainty in communicating COVID-19 issues. The most commonly used theories to tackle uncertainty were risk information seeking and processing models (e.g. Griffin et al., 1999), uncertainty management theories (see Bradac, 2001; Brashers, 2001), and prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The notable lack of theory-driven scholarship could be interpreted as a lack of (science) communication skills among researchers who should do a better job clearly expressing how theory informed their research (see DeAndrea & Holbert, 2017); or there is a certain mismatch between existing communication theories and understanding extreme uncertainty in a complex, fast developing environment.

The fourth paper by Wagner-Olfermann addresses the question of how media construct and legitimize political leadership in transboundary crises. It aims at answering the question of how the media construct and legitimize political leadership across countries during transboundary crises. In order to empirically capture this phenomenon of growing interest and likely of high relevance in the future, Wagner-Olfermann introduces a Discursive Actor Attribution Analysis tool (attribution quadrature) that can be used to assess transboundary leadership in (longitudinal) comparative content analyses of transboundary crises.

As guest editors of this special issue, we would like to express our deepest gratitude to the Editor-in-Chief of the *Annals of the International Communication Association*, Herman Wasserman, and Associate Editor Thomas Hanitzsch, who approached us with this wonderful opportunity to edit a special issue. Them both being incredibly welcoming for innovative ideas, their open-mindedness for the journal, and kindness made this journey a wonderful experience during these challenging times. We are proud to now being able to present this special issue as an opportunity to look back at what we have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic for the future of communication scholarship moving forward.

Disclosure statement

ORCID

Sebastian Scherr http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4730-1575
Florian Arendt http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1107-8682

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