

Editorial introduction

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Covid-19. What's left to say? Aside from the almost trite but still essential acknowledgement of how horrible this disease has been (the sheer scale of deaths around the world, the number of people hurt and damaged by it, the just-as-serious crisis in trust in human contact); aside from the more contentious clashes about the role of medical and epidemiological sciences in responses to the disease, and dreadful intrusions of political ideologies and economic opportunisms), it seems trivial – perhaps almost offensive – to try to discuss the impact of coronavirus on one small academic field like ours. But that's what we are going to attempt. In what specific ways do the world-changing events of the 2020 pandemic make a difference to the questions and the conduct of audience and reception research?

Conduct, first. It's obvious that the lockdown, and subsequent fluctuating restrictions on human contact and meeting in groups must have pretty much stopped face-to-face interviews, focus groups and a range of experimental techniques. Of course that leaves an array of methods, particularly online ones (email conversations, online interviews or questionnaires, for instance, but also examining and analysing online materials [including of course social media]) – but we have a strong suspicion that, although in some ways lockdown has released time for research activities, most likely a lot of empirical research has been stopped or at least paused. A fair proportion of the empirical research that we receive as submissions originates in PhDs, and work on these has for sure been disrupted for all kinds of reasons. It will be interesting to see to what extent the 'footfall' of submissions shifts over the next 2-3 years.

But in the longer term, it will be both interesting and challenging to see how a generation of audience researchers also see new and different questions pushed to the fore by the pandemic. Some are easy to pose (though of course not at all easy to answer): how have viewing, listening and reading practices altered as a result of the enforced privatisation of so many lives? The restructuring of time, and the rush of publishers and broadcasters to make available a catalogue of potential materials, have assuredly affected – differentially – the media habits of people in different ages, genders, and social locations. 'Binge-viewing' (or listening, or reading) has become pretty much normalised – but is it felt and understood

in the same ways as the older versions? With the loss for many months of almost all possibilities of live culture (music, theatre, sports, etc), where they could many people sought substitutes. What were these, how were they experienced, and what long-term differences are they making to people's future expectations and engagements?

Then come some really important questions about *trust*. Who are seen in different places as honest information-providers and commentators, on the virus, and its management? While mainstream media tend to reduce this question to fears of anti-vax campaigners and the like (mainly operating online), there are many broader issues about people's relations with all kinds of media. At the same time, the accelerating shift to online lives has reminded very sharply of the continuing (worsening?) digital divides within and between countries and continents. Who has been able to shore up their lives with Zoom meetings, downloading of learning materials for their children, and so on? Who hasn't?

And of course cutting a severe angle across all this has been the powerful international upsurge of the Black Lives Matter movement. Refusing to be stalled by national governments hypocritically and opportunistically citing safety concerns, BLM has built its own media presence (and theatrics) – and there are plenty of signs that it has for many people put the issues of racism and colonialism in the forefront as never before. For whom, how, and with what evolving effects are vital questions. And how apposite is the common expression, the 'new normal'? What practices, feelings and attitudes are now changed for good (or evil ...), and which ones will gradually revert to their old forms? For us, these are empirical issues – to be thought about now, but properly studied in coming years.

Only one essay in this edition of *Participations* directly considers coronavirus-related issues: Mark Fox's timely essay on the changes in audience protocols at US drive-in cinemas, which tidily reminds us of the host of ordinary rules and restraints which affect our engagement with films, in all kinds of contexts. The remainder in our open section all derive from pre-pandemic researches, covering a range from television and Canadian national identity, audience perceptions of women within the James Bond franchise, the overall patterning of contemporary film audiences, and the possibilities of understanding animals' responses to the media. As ever, we are extremely pleased at the sheer range of approaches and materials we are able to offer.

Alongside these individual essays, we are pleased once again to have the opportunity to publish two Themed Sections: one addressing the nature of comics fandom; the other contributes to ongoing debates within contemporary feminism about the ways politics and celebrity inhabit and shape popular culture. These have their own Introductions so I shall not repeat what is said there, in each case.