Roundtable 2:
COVID-19 media contexts and antimicrobial resistance communication

Wednesday 6 October, 3-4.30pm AEST, via zoom

How can and should we stage messages about AMR in COVID-19 media contexts? The pandemic has focussed attention on public health, hygiene, infection prevention and vaccines, perhaps offering opportunities for AMR communications. At the same time, the pandemic sets a high bar on what counts as public health threat. In this SSN roundtable, leading media and communications scholars reflect on these opportunities and considerations for health threat communications in our post-COVID-19 era.

SPEAKERS

Angela Ndalianis, Director, Centre for Transformative Media Technologies, Swinburne University of Technology. Angela is Research Professor in Media and Entertainment. Her research focuses on entertainment culture (films, video games, television, VR, comic books and theme parks) and the history of media technologies and how they mediate our experience of the world around us. Her expertise is in the transformative nature of media technologies – past and present – and how technologies impact on embodiment, the senses and perception.

Andy Ruddock, School of Media, Film and Journalism, Monash University. Andy’s work focusses on new ways to conceive how media make social reality. Andy is author of Exploring Media Research (2017), Youth and Media (2013) Investigating Audiences (2007) and Understanding Audiences, (2001). His new book, Digital Influence, explores the histories of phenomena such as representations of gender in film and reality TV, violence in political memes, the mainstreaming of populism, gun-control activism and public criticisms of media education.

Monique Lewis, Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, Griffith University. Monique is a communication and sociology scholar at Griffith University, with a particular interest in exploring the framing of health news. Her research has focused on news media representations of COVID-19, medicinal cannabis, complementary medicine, and public health campaigns, and she is co-editor of ‘Communicating COVID-19: Interdisciplinary Perspectives’ (Palgrave).

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COVID-19, PANDEMIC MEDIA AND THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY

Angela Ndalianis, Director, Centre for Transformative Media Technologies, Swinburne University of Technology

Whether taking the form of films, social media exchanges, or memes, since the arrival of the coronavirus, pandemic media have taken centre stage in mediating collective life on a global scale and have become embedded in and give expression to our social imaginary. In this roundtable, I will examine the dialogue that takes place between pandemic media – films, TV shows, social media – and human perception of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the recent dystopian, science fiction film Songbird (Adam Mason 2020) imagines COVID-19 as a superbug that has, by 2024, evolved into the deadly Covid-23. With the virus having built up antimicrobial resistance, governments have been forced to set up concentration camps that house the infected. While fundamentally a love story, Songbird nevertheless uses storytelling to imagine the ‘what if’ scenario of Covid-19 even more out of control. In other examples, it is traditional film viewers who have created their own imaginations. Here, I will focus on how individuals living through Covid-19 have drawn upon their knowledge of pandemic media examples (especially zombie films/TV series) to make sense of – seriously, critically, comically – the pandemic through the circulation of memes. I will examine how the social imaginary that is rehearsed across these examples can be a powerful discursive form that reflects real-world social, moral and ethical issues.

YOU CAN’T HANDLE THE TRUTH: MEDIA AUDIENCES AND THE SOCIAL MOTIVATIONS BEHIND CONSPIRACY AND MISINFORMATION

Andy Ruddock, School of Media, Film and Journalism, Monash University

The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review has published eight articles on the difficulties of nurturing Covid literacy in global digital media environments in the last year. Seven of these articles focus on audiences as crucial participants in the circulation of health information – accurate or otherwise. Whether fanning the flames of conspiracy theories (Chen et al., 2020; Soares et al., 2021), or bolstering digital barricades against the hordes of misinformation (Kim et al., 2021; Siwakoti et al., 2021; Epstein et al., 2021; Weintraub Austin et al., 2020), media audiences are conceived here as much more than the targets of health information.

This paper presents a short history of audience research to identify some of the landmarks and paradoxes that partly explain the apparent disorder around Covid communication. That history suggests that audiences participate in media culture when it rewards them with company, community and esteem. It also indicates that the present problem of audience fuelled conspiracy and misinformation is entirely in keeping with ecologies where industries and audiences alike have happily shifted the weight of political communication toward popular culture. In summary, the history of audience research indicates the social logic that drives some audiences into the arms of pandemic obfuscation.

IMAGINING AUDIENCES IN A POST-COVID-19 WORLD

Monique Lewis, Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, Griffith University

The SARS CoV-2 pandemic has brought about unprecedented disruption to public health, our social and mental worlds, our mobilities, and our economies. The magnitude and urgency of the pandemic have been articulated at saturation levels in news stories around the world, making it the most mediatised health event in history. COVID news is co-produced by a vast range of different actors who influence the news-making process. Audiences in health news are implied within this construction process, and the final product – the news story – offers insights into the distinct types of ‘imagined audiences’ at play. In this roundtable discussion I will explore these possible ‘imagined audiences’ implied in news stories and narratives and will discuss their relevance in the context of antimicrobial resistance. A collectivist worldview is arguably being cultivated in COVID news stories, where citizens are regarded less as biomedical individuals and more as agentic ‘public health citizens’ (Holland and Lewis, forthcoming). This pattern we are witnessing in COVID news reporting may reverberate and resonate for the post-COVID context, for the benefit of AMR advocacy and reporting.