

MEDIA INDUSTRIES IN CRISIS

What COVID Unmasked

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INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

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Vicki Mayer

Captain, we have a problem.

—Virtually any movie

We have a problem. The threat is dire and the manual is lost. The problem or crisis serves as the dramatic catalyst for so many film narratives that must be resolved by our heroes in no more than three hours of film run time. Although filmic threats tend to be rather unlikely—asteroids, world war, space aliens—most people’s understanding of crisis management and communications are received as much if not more so from film and media than they are from experts in the profession. Crisis managers and crisis communications experts are the people within an organization or institution who identify a crisis, analyze its dimensions, and mobilize the resources at hand in order to stop or at least neutralize the threat’s effects. Most crises that must be managed in the workplace or in a community may focus on more mundane tasks, such as how to maintain approval ratings after a bad debate performance. But the sense of crisis management as routine was upended by a virus that seemed the stuff of global melodramatic terror and suspense that only a blockbuster film could envision.

The sudden rush of popularity of past pandemic films—think *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016), *Outbreak* (Wolfgang Petersen 1995), and *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002)—in the earliest stages of the spread of COVID soon waned as it became clear the window for the cinematic resolution had closed. For months in 2020, media audiences worldwide tottered between consuming the hysteria of news coverage and the escapism

of streaming TV series, between beliefs and disbeliefs, between an urge for knowledge and a need for denial. Media industries, in fact, served all of these diverse purposes with fresh and rebooted fictional, documentary, and news content, providing some solace amidst uncertainty with one hand, while also stoking fears that the crisis might never end. Whatever the emotion, film and media would provide a fix. Behind the scenes, however, media industries themselves were in crisis. As people borders closed around the world and stay-at-home orders rolled out, media industries knuckled down to make sure there was abundant content, both in quantity and quality, that audiences in liberal societies were accustomed to and that many craved.

In an era marked by widespread public masking and required social distancing, this book pulls off the metaphorical mask that generally separates media consumers from the apparatuses for media production and distribution. A diverse set of companies and industries that swim together in societies connected by globalized markets but still divided by national regulations and norms are obfuscated by our colloquial use of the phrase “the media.” “Media industries” in this book includes everything from the film studio majors to television production companies, to broadcasters, to cinema theater chains, to second language dubbing studios, to platform social media such as Reddit. Media industries confronted the challenges of COVID in ways that were both unique to politics, economics, and cultures of their own communications systems, and yet had transnational implications. Unmasking these experiences helps us understand how media industries fared when faced with a similar but changing set of COVID conditions.

Yet Another Crisis

Among media industries, film has the longest résumé for expertise in crisis management and communications. Arguably, film industries globally have nearly always been “in crisis,” though they seem to provide cover for them and recover quite well. In light of these histories, COVID is just another crisis.

The rise of major film studios in Los Angeles (aka Hollywood) relied on several recurring crises over suitable land tenancies, pliant laborers, and a favorable system of laissez faire governance. World War I may have led to the migration of auteurist film expertise from France and Germany, but World War II then leveled any semblance of media industries everywhere else in Europe and Asia. In the aftermath, Western European media revived only through a heavy reliance on US companies supplying technologies and professional expertise.¹ Film and television industries in Africa, Asia,

and the Americas grew alongside state-sponsored modernization projects. Conversely, US media industries sought out new production and distribution agreements in the wake of disassembled war propaganda machinery and federal trust-busting legislation that made their integrated factory model less profitable. Producers managed the crisis by colonizing Latin American media distribution and setting up production locations in Canada, Italy, France, and Great Britain, where they could avoid US taxes and secure cheaper crews.² By the 1960s, film coproduction became the norm to support both national cinemas with small markets and major film studios circumventing national financial restrictions and regulations.³ To this day, the persistence of coproduction arrangements and locational shooting in the most film-friendly production geographies as well as the global conglomeration of media distributors, whether via news wire, cable TV, or the Internet, have continued as strategies to ensure continued growth and profitability, even during the worst economic and political crises of the past half century.

To fully understand how media industries grow stronger in straddling crises, think of the decade just prior to the COVID pandemic. The 2008 financial collapse of Wall Street brokers Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers reverberated as big banks and finance firms headed to the poor house. At the time of the meltdown, transnational media industries were already heavily leveraged. For five months, US guild film and television writers put their pencils down and went on strike against the studios. Deregulation had allowed a merger mania between internet providers, platforms, and content producers, leading to streaming mega-partnerships Audible-Amazon, YouTube-Alphabet (Google). More than 1,000 US media deals were sealed in 2007, nearly half of them through \$44 billion in global private equity, with another 340 media deals waiting to close when their credit lines contracted.⁴ In the following year, media mergers and acquisitions fell more than 60% in Europe, a decline in capital investment that would be a death knell in retail and other consumer markets.⁵ Unlike the banks, media industries were not too big to fail.

Even in the face of these financial strains, national and transnational film and television companies ultimately still declared victories. US distributors and the new streaming giants began buying up cheaper series from boutique and format production houses located in Argentina, South Africa, and Scandinavia.⁶ The Motion Picture Association of America doubled down on lobbying politicians and suppressing labor strife. National, regional, and local film tax incentive schemes expanded to lure production employment and buoyed by the logic that “At a time when most industries are suffering harsh retrenchments, Hollywood is churning out one of the few products that people are still lining up to buy.”⁷ Ironically, the director

of the ultimate movie about greed, *Wall Street* by Oliver Stone, said he had no moral qualm with taking more than \$10 million in public monies for his sequel, because “it’s good, or basically the way business is done.”⁸ Meanwhile, industry workers who had been mobilizing for better royalties in the face of digital and streaming media were mollified. To no avail, a Hollywood union leader warned that film studios would take advantage of “the economic uncertainty of 2008 to scare you into making a deal you will regret in 2010 and beyond.”⁹ The lessons of media industry crises are that they may be spurred by global crises of capitalism, such as financial crashes or hyperinflation, but these industries seemed not only to have survived, but have gotten more powerful as a result.

Conversely, film and television workers have had a harder time creating long-lasting changes in these transnational and global industries. Labor self-exploitation and uncertainty have been norms in media and other creative industries, which operate on the basis of short-term contracts and the maintenance of one’s reputation to secure future employment.¹⁰ Globalized media production and trade further hobbled labor through a new international division of cultural workers, which fortified organizational hierarchies and concentrated power in geographic media production and distribution hubs, such as Los Angeles, Mumbai, London, Lagos, Cairo, and Shanghai.¹¹ While some workers in these industries have invested in self-preservation tactics, others have pushed back on these sharp inequalities with calls for social justice. Bloodlettings of top media talent and producers became media spectacles in the wake of social media accusations of sexual and racial violence. Internationally, it is to be seen if scandal produces little more than anti-bias seminars in media industries. As long as feminism and inclusivity are seen as risky behaviors within employer networks and employment pipelines, social changes within media industries may be as precarious as the labor itself.¹²

Some of the less publicized aspects of the 2008 financial crisis were the ways that investors from autocratic countries came to underwrite media industry financing. The marketization of media in public service countries did little to disrupt the growth of illiberal media systems.¹³ Private equity firms could flout national ownership rules in a financialized global media market. Russian oligarchs gobbled up British telecommunications and news providers. The Chinese state allowed its billionaires to create social media platforms to broker deals with five of six of the Hollywood film majors and to purchase the largest movie theater chain in the world. These moves helped the billionaire class in China gain a foothold in the US stock market when it took the company public.¹⁴ When the Chinese government curbed their foreign dealers in 2016, Hollywood looked to Saudi Arabian King Bin Salman’s promises to invest \$64 billion into entertainment industries

through “partnering with the best,” as he told a reporter for *The New York Times*.¹⁵ The shifting terrain of media ownership and trading flows made industries even more vulnerable to wars and political strife.

The Unexceptional Pandemic

On the first murmurings that something was rotten in Wuhan, most media industry leaders around the world went into overdrive in presenting themselves as “essential” in the crisis. This was not because they were overleveraged or sought new alibis for depressing labor power; rather, they argued that in times of crisis, people need more media. According to the industry’s own metrics companies, such as Nielsen and the World Advertising Research Center (WARC), audiences hungered for more digital media in all forms. News of increased online media consumption and of online news in particular drove up digital advertising sales in all international markets. Television viewers in “emerging markets” in Indonesia, Italy, Mexico, and the Philippines added an extra hour of viewing each day. In the largest Anglophone markets, streaming media services claimed to see unprecedented growth. “We think that the ongoing spread of COVID-19 will lead to higher engagement and better subscriber growth for streaming services around the world near-term,” exclaimed the head of US media research for JP Morgan Alexia Quadrini.¹⁶ These mission-driven announcements had the desired effects on media industries. Venture capital quickly flooded streaming apps and over-the-top video services, leaving broadcast and cable with new revenues through licensing or mergers of content libraries. Meanwhile, vultures began picking over the remnants of companies without digital holdings, namely movie theaters.

The term “essential” was specific in this epic pandemic.¹⁷ To most public, it would not need repeating that health, police, and workers involved in critical infrastructures would be the first population deemed essential workers. State governor Gavin Newsom pronounced that Hollywood “workers supporting the entertainment industries, studios, and other related establishments” were also essential, thus exempt from stay-at-home orders.¹⁸ An oblique passage in the US Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) list of essential industries permitted his decision, noting: “Jurisdictions have flexibility in weighing local economic and infrastructure needs, ethical considerations, and other equity factors in order to prioritize those [industries...] for COVID-19 vaccine allocation.”¹⁹ However radical this claim felt to some, Newsom was late to the game. As our timeline shows (see pages xi-xii), many countries already had returned to work by June 2020. Others slowed, but never stopped. Some born-digital media industries ramped up production more easily than legacy media industries.

Animation and gaming studios, effects and dubbing houses already distributed their workflows across vast distances. Together, these firms joined forces to be a part of public health campaigns to wash your hands and pull your mask up.

By identifying those industries that were in national interests to maintain face-to-face work settings, some countries gave blanket permission to media companies to operate alongside other essential industries while mandating the virtualization of education, most civil and government services, and all other forms of popular culture. Live events and theaters bore the brunt of the decision to lockdown audiences and lock out cultural forms operating in enclosed settings—except film and television. COVID policies punctuated the uneven fates of a multinational corporation or a homegrown film festival, or of an electrical grip who might be able to work in a film studio versus a theater or music club. To “pivot” became the new buzzword.

Keeping the show going on, as it were, has been a complicated negotiation between film and television stakeholders, key personnel, and audiences. Film and television industries had to mobilize their resources, from local labor to national lobbies, to international supply chains. They had to counter negative publicity when an outbreak occurred or when an unruly partisan decided to be “non-compliant.” In other words, *media industries became first responders in anticipating their own communications crises* amidst a global health emergency.

Bringing Crisis Management and Communications Perspectives to Media Industries

Most books on crisis management and communications see “the media” as antithetical to administrative and public relations strategies. The media are charged with making problems visible, if not sensational. The media defend the public’s right to know, if not demand action. The media can make a crisis better or worse, which frequently implies that crisis communicators need to be proactive and to keep media industries at arm’s length.²⁰ In other words, crisis management as a field of study frequently sees media industries as instrumental to another organization’s goals rather than as organizations weathering their own storms. Such a perspective provides another framework for considering how COVID’s effects were felt even in these organizations that have largely seen the health crisis as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Crisis management and communications as a field observes changes at the meso level between individuals and large social forces. Industries are defined as complex organizations made of multiple, sometimes competing,

constituents. For example, whereas shareholders' primary perspectives and goals are profit-driven, employees frequently perceive organizations based on whether they feel recognized and respected by them. In times of crisis, these constituents become stakeholders in looking to organizations to act on their behalf. Conversely, organizations need stakeholders' commitment to resolve crises to survive. In their textbook definition of crisis management, Dan Pyle Millar and Robert Heath understand organizational responses primarily in terms of stakeholders' interests.²¹ Unmanaged crises create spillover effects in terms of organizations' reputations and their legitimacy with other publics, which, in turn, affect finances, investments, governance, and the sustainability of organizations.

Part I of this book focuses on media industry stakeholders in the COVID crisis. As Miranda Banks maps out, media production stakeholders typically include groups located across a number of different sectors that represent management and labor. In Hollywood, the COVID response mobilized everyone, from the studio executives in the C-Suites to the craft union officials, to the professionals of the creative guilds. While stakeholders occasionally air their dirty laundry publicly, through a strike or a social media storm, the pandemic seemed to cast all old antagonisms to the wayside, at least temporarily, while they mobilized a response. The coalitions within media industries reverberated throughout other stakeholder groups. Kate Fortmueller's chapter on Hollywood film economies outside of Los Angeles lays out the mobilization of insurance lawyers, politicians, safety gear manufacturers, and real estate investors who lined up to turn lemons to lemonade. Similarly, Enrique Uribe Jongbloed and César Mora Moreo's analysis of Colombian media industry stakeholders displays the outsized power of the Hollywood behemoth. Launched as a roadmap to a prosperous creative economy, Orange Economy policies failed to deliver a sustainable path for a nation overly dependent on foreign film investment. The result in many places dulled Hollywood's COVID messaging. Bridget Conor's assessment of the New Zealand press' attacks on Kirsten Dunst's nanny as an "essential worker" during this period harbored decades of *ressentiment* toward media industry elites, while also deflecting that anger on a relatively powerless caretaker.

The management of a crisis thus is entangled with its communication. "Crisis management deals with managing reality; crisis communications deals with shaping perceptions," offers one prominent PR professional.²² Many of the chapters in this book offer the failure of media industries and governments to communicate cohesive reasons why the already precarious workforces behind media making should endanger themselves to entertain those in lockdown. For this reason, it is vital to focus on media industry workers as stakeholders engaged in labor struggles that predate

the pandemic. For Mariz Kelada and Chahib El Khachab, government and industry claims that COVID was an exceptional crisis rang hollow in Egypt, where media workers have always been summoned to self-sacrifice or risk unemployment. Contrastingly, Anne Soronen shows that media workers were capable of solidarity with fellow cultural workers to reject Finland's often confusing communications about creative work during COVID. Understanding the crisis in terms of the stakes in the ongoing labor struggles can help us understand why some media industries in some countries reacted swiftly to the pandemic, while others' prolonged negotiations between stakeholders prevented a clear set of action guidelines over the ensuing months.

As the pandemic wore on through variant viral strands, travel bans, and vaccine roll outs, media industries promised to never let a good crisis go to waste. The essays in Part II offer short case studies of the ways media industries and their stakeholders reacted to the newsworthy moments of the crisis. Told as tales "ripped from the headlines," in the words of a US police procedural, scholars of communication and media around the world watched from their posts, as the industries they study expanded and contracted, responded and reacted, flourished and failed during COVID. In Poland and in Ireland, media industries flourished. Michał Pabiś-Orzeszyna describes Netflix's ability to fulfill its Eastern European ambitions via pandemic relief schemas for workers. In Ireland the film studio ecosystem has exploded, thanks to private equity, which Bill Grantham tracks unflinchingly as a risky proposition for national stakeholders. The focus on media infrastructures continues through Darshana Sreedhar Mini's chapter on India, where COVID was a flex point for media and communications conglomerates to expand.

Perhaps more visibly to the public were the news stories of media creators who engaged COVID politics head on. The demand for content—what Mini calls "pandemic entertainment" in India—put actors and directors in the position of public health spokespeople. For TV serial (*dizi*) stars in Turkey, their message across social media was: "We are not essential workers." Zeynep Sertbulut shows the deep class and political divisions that fueled crisis communications that contradicted the government's official return-to-work mandate for media workers. Conversely, South Africa's top brass for media industries rewrote the script when the international press lambasted the country for scientifically identifying the Omicron variant. Jessica Dickson presents how media industries both leveraged and were complicit with colonialist framings of Africa as the source of crises. These chapters stress that although the dominant narrative for organizations was to "follow the science," there would be vast national differences into what the science was or how to follow it, illustrating that all crisis

management and communications reflect a particular worldview and power relationships.²³

Those views should include those of workers. Behind corporate and government communications, media workers endured COVID in particular ways, as the months turned to years. Independent media maker Angela Tucker illustrates the challenges she faced as a social justice documentarist, a television director in Louisiana (aka Hollywood South), and a woman of color over the span of three interviews in the first three years of COVID. With laughter, she measures the distances between the rhetoric of inclusive media industries and the reality of pandemic media production. Ergin Bulut and Elena Altheman further explain how the pandemic laid previous inequities bare and stimulated new ones. Bulut focuses on “handcuff contracts,” which committed workers to unsafe conditions in Turkey. Altheman looks at transnational “animation contact zones” which embraced precarious foreign contracts under a right-wing leader. The three authors concur that a crisis often exacerbates deeper crises.

Such was the case for media exhibition, as the pandemic delivered another blow to cinemas in a struggle against streaming companies. Trade insiders witnessed the battle firsthand through CinemaCon 2021, which Charlotte Orzel chronicles to expose the hyperbolic communications of some of the mightiest media moguls. In contrast, film festivals decided that if they could not beat the streaming platforms, then they would join them. Skadi Loist offers three models for innovating festivals when cinemas were closed in Germany. These two chapters leave the questions that Toby Miller raises about the risky financialization of culture industries and how to interpret the social media-fueled, amateur stock takeover of the American Multi-Cinema (AMC) at the height of the Delta variant wave. His chapter forewarns of the cyclical nature inherent to crisis in capitalism, making a pandemic less exceptional than predictable in what Ulrich Beck called risk societies.²⁴

Part III anticipates future crises for media industries with the lessons that COVID taught its stakeholders. For as public health experts inveigh:

In fact, coronavirus is the real phenomenon of globalization, even though we must keep in mind that we must see global threats and opportunities together. Undoubtedly, living in the post-COVID-19 world requires a rethinking of the intelligent system for all nations. From this perspective, the current outbreak should be considered an opportunity to make significant changes in future life.²⁵

Crisis lessons strike at the heart of the transformations needed in media industries. Speaking from the Israeli frontlines of entwined COVID and

political crises, Noa Lavie's entreaties to beware media-made populists is a call for media democratization and a return to democratic news values. This kind of systemic change underlines the climate crisis as well. Comparing the relatively slow pace of greening policies with those for COVID in Dutch film and television production, Judith Keilbach suggests that media industries adopt environmental protocols to slow environmental catastrophes. These kinds of widespread transformations demand the mobilization of external stakeholders pushing for new kinds of crisis management practices.

Meanwhile, internal stakeholders in media industries should also be taking notes. The rapid responses of those who saw when opportunity knocked became more resilient. Communication scholar Patrice Buzznell defines resilience as the time when organizations reframe the "craziness of it all" and construct a new normal.²⁶ For Tanya Horeck and Susan Berridge, the new normal for British media industries adopts the ethics of care and consent that intimacy coordinators introduced so as to return to studio production. For Teja swini Ganti, organizations with strong social networks and flexible organizational cultures illustrated they are better prepared to manage uncertainty. Her comparative analysis of two Indian media industries shows that the linguistic dubbing industry was open to new ways of working during COVID, which resulted from effective crisis communications and resource sharing. Such lessons were less durable in China, according to Ying Zhu. The meteoric rise of the Chinese film box office in 2020 and 2021 came crashing down after a convergence of national COVID restrictions, poor industrial subsidies, and the return of international film blockbusters. Zhu, along with the various perspectives in this book, demonstrate that COVID became a catchall to describe the panoply of problems that affected particular countries at different moments. And as a result, we can safely conclude with a crisis communications refrain: "One size does not fit all crises, and this is particularly true for pandemics."²⁷

Notes

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- 2 For good histories of early incursions of Hollywood into other national cinemas, See: Tamara Falicov, "Hollywood's Presence in Latin America: Production Participation to Distribution Dominance," in *International Encyclopedia of Media Studies*, Volume 2, ed. Vicki Mayer. (London: Wiley, 2012). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444361506.wbiems044>; Manjunath Pendakur, *Canadian Dreams and American Control: The Political Economy of the Canadian Film Industry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019); Daniel Steinhart, *Runaway Hollywood: Internationalizing Postwar Production and Location Shooting* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

- 3 Norbert Morawetz et al., “Finance, Policy and Industrial Dynamics: The Rise of Co-productions in the Film Industry,” *Industry and Innovation* 14, no. 4 (2007): 421–443.
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- 10 There is a long literature on this but a good place to start is Pierre-Michel Menger, *The Economics of Creativity: Art and Achievement Under Uncertainty*, translated by Steven Rendall (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
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- 12 For recent work on these gaps, see: Anamik Saha, “Production Studies of Race and the Political Economy of Media,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 1 (2020): 138–142. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2020.0067>; Skadi Loist, and Deb Verhoeven, “Complex Not Complicated: Gendered Media Industries in the Wake of #MeToo,” *Media Industries* 6, no. 1 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.3998/mij.15031809.0006.104>.
- 13 Colin Sparks, “Post-Communism, Democratisation and the Media: (Nearly) Thirty Years On,” *Javnost* 25, nos. 1–2 (2018): 144–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1423979>.
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