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Editors' Introduction

By the time that this Spring Issue of the *Central European Journal of Communication* (CEJC) is cleared to be printed, we have spent more than a year of our lives under the dictate of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic – and there is no doubt that it has had an unprecedented impact on our actions, in both professional and private contexts. While many of us continue to struggle with the conditions of life under lockdown, it is undisputed that media and communication in their various forms are playing a paramount role in our attempts to cope with Covid-19. Thanks to the possibilities of digital media, we can stay in touch with friends and family even during a time when the principles of ‘social distancing’ are inevitable; we use a broad bandwidth of (traditional and innovative) communication tools that facilitate our worklife, even if we cannot leave our home offices; and, of course, media continue to be an important source of public information for every citizen, particularly with regard to the state of the pandemic. It is probably no exaggeration to state that, in the face of the virus, life without media is hard to imagine.

On the other hand, as Mark Deuze also points out in his tone-setting opener for this Spring Issue, the role of media and communication studies as an academic discipline amidst the turmoil of the pandemic is by no means so clear and unambiguous. Of course, it did not take long after the initial news of the spread of the virus in 2020 until the first scholarly analyses of the implications of the pandemic for media and journalism were published. And in the meantime, a broad range of fascinating research on the most different aspects of this topic has flourished in Central Europe and all around the world. However, while many academic disciplines gained public visibility in the course of the past year (with many experts, particularly from the fields of virology and medicine, being regular checkpoints in the daily news), communication researchers remained strangely silent in the public discourse. In retrospect, it seems that media and communication studies are still searching for their place in the current confusion – as if to find and come to terms with their own identity and role in society.

The analysis by Mark Deuze, which is published as a part of the new “Methods and Concepts” section of the CEJC, suggests that this discrepancy may have deeper (and to some extent: structural) reasons that are not directly related to the coronavirus pandemic. Indeed, media and communication researchers have long struggled with the more general problem of coming to terms with the increasingly dispersed, hybridized, networked, or automated character of communication, as displayed in the digitized media world of today. In order to tackle this problem, Deuze calls for a more human-based and holistic type

of communication research, which follows the key aims of positionality, methodological integration, and publicness. This call, in various ways, encapsulates the spirit of many of the contributions that are collected in this issue of CEJC.

Following Deuze's opening piece, the issue unites six original research papers by authors working in such diverse countries as Sweden, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Russia, Hungary, and Spain. They cover a wide range of topics from the sub-fields of political communication, journalism studies, audience research, political art, and popular culture, among other aspects, and although most of the studies presented in the papers were launched long before the start of the pandemic, together they seem to echo Deuze's call for a critical self-contemplation of the discipline – at least from a methodological perspective.

Marju Himma-Kadakas and Mirjam Mõttus explore change processes in Estonian newsrooms, particularly with regard to their willingness to cooperate with freelance journalists. Based on two waves of semi-structured interviews, the authors detect a notable trend towards outsourcing journalistic tasks as well as a changing image of freelancers who increasingly have to take on entrepreneurial roles, too.

The ensuing papers by Zina Stovickova as well as Katrin Dkhair and Polina Klochko highlight different aspects of electoral campaign coverage and the varying images of Eastern politicians such as Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky. While Stovickova uses Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the representation of Putin in Czech online media, Dkhair and Klochko combine network analysis, the construction of n-grams, and LDA-based topic modeling to compare Zelensky's portrayal in Russian and Ukrainian news. Both papers reveal interesting contrasts – not only conceptually.

The articles by Ágnes Virág and by Agnes Strickland-Pajtok turn the spotlight on Hungary – again with contrasting methodological approaches. The former showcases the potential of visual framing in an empirical study that analyses how the Hungarian Parliament is depicted in political artworks. The latter presents results from a series of interviews with female Hungarian TV viewers and evaluates the extent that watching the HBO drama series *The Handmaid's Tale* encourages them to develop their sense of cultural citizenship.

The final research paper by Paloma Piqueiras and María José Canel exemplifies the promises of comparative research designs in media and communication studies. The authors introduce economic indicators and survey data from 17 European countries to explore the relationship between wealth, citizen engagement, and trust in public institutions. These insights are used to discuss practical implications for public sector communication. The specific challenges of such large-scale comparative projects also resonate in the subsequent interview with Claudia Mellado, in which she provides insights into her pioneering research about journalistic role performance.

Notwithstanding the broad spectrum of geographical representation and methodological approaches covered by the articles in this Spring Issue of CEJC, it remains open for debate as to how far the contributions can live up to Mark Deuze's demand for more public scholarship – and leave an impact on political and public discourses. Certainly, inclusion in a peer-reviewed academic journal like CEJC can only be a starting point in this process. In this sense, we (as the editors of this issue) are hoping for a lively follow-up discussion – for example in one of the journal's social media channels. We are grateful to all contributors who made it possible to complete this issue despite the challenging circumstances of the current pandemic.

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