YouTube and Online Video in Lockdown: Digital Platforms, Culture and Coping During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This special issue of *Networking Knowledge* was initially planned during the end of summer 2020, relatively early in the pandemic. At the time it was assumed that due to the time-consuming nature of academic publishing, any research released on the lockdown period would need to take a retrospective role, looking back at the traumatic, but temporary upheaval of 2020 from the relative safety of a slowly recovering world. But as the pandemic continued, it became clear that this issue would arrive long before anything had returned to normal, into a context in which educational and cultural institutions have been forever transformed by the necessity for physical distance. This short editorial will first briefly outline the context for this special issue, and then introduce the themes and some key points of interest raised by the scholarship presented within.

Though the lived reality and shared trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic has evolved significantly over the last two years and has differed greatly based on socioeconomic stability, vocation and location, the earliest months of lockdowns were understood by many as a collective experience, mediated online through social interaction, media consumption and popular culture. This reflexive mediation of a shared 'lockdown experience' was particularly visible in social media discourse but could also be seen in other media through its response to the needs of a traumatised, isolated audience in the form of an increase in the consumption of comfort media and journalistic coverage discussing the impact of lockdown measures along with the pandemic itself. Media events such as the popularity of new video games such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and bingeable TV shows like *Tiger King* (and to some extent *Squid Game* the following year) were experienced entirely online, as discussion and audience engagement of any form was necessarily digital. Of course, this was already the way many people engaged with media on a daily basis before the pandemic, but was nonetheless entirely recontextualised by becoming audiences' only available option. There were also occasional departures from 'bingeable' content, such as the weekly episodic release of shows like Marvel's *WandaVision* – the show itself acting as a nostalgic celebration of television's history as a storytelling medium. In the context of the pandemic, this release mode gave audiences the opportunity for collective viewing, though as usual, the specific times the episodes dropped prioritised some global audiences over others.

Meanwhile, the shared social experience of adjusting to the awkward navigation of human interaction via video call was in some respects a universal experience, but also one defined by age, and unequal access to digital technology, and the privilege of an uninterrupted home-working environment. New connections between the private and the public have resulted in complicated relationships with digital intimacy, which have been anxiously articulated in many

ways, fr om Twitter accounts like Bookcase Credibility (@BCredibility) humorously analysing bookcases in Zoom backgrounds, "Zoom fail" video compilations, to comedians such as Caitlin Reilly enjoying viral TikTok fame through impersonating the passive-aggressive online presence of over-enthusiastic colleagues. The resultant 'zoom aesthetic' was reflexively explored in media created about *and* under these very constraints in shows like BBC comedy *Staged* (2020) as well as numerous YouTube series such as *Reunited Apart*, which is explored in detail by Hayley Louise Charlesworth later in the issue.

This special issue was originally imagined as potentially focussing on the stars of online video platforms (working title: 'Social Influence, Social Distance') and the isolated consumption of online content. To our minds, the very nature of lockdown necessitated a focus on individual users and influencers. But on the contrary, even early in the pandemic many of the proposals received chose instead to focus on group behaviour – collaboration, collective efforts to survive socially and financially, and more generally the *shared* experience of the internet mediated pandemic. Another, related quality shared by many proposals was a multi-platform scope – accounting for the fact that while video hosting platforms like YouTube and Netflix played key cultural roles during the pandemic, some of the most innovative or noteworthy behaviour was found on more socially orientated platforms like TikTok (and the aforementioned Zoom). TikTok's rise to cultural prominence in 2019 has only been spurred on during the intervening years, becoming a centre of online collaboration and creativity to rival any other on the internet (Stokel-Walker, 2021). Meanwhile, Zoom and other conferencing platforms like Discord became the primary spaces for sociality, as millions of people simultaneously grappled with leisure and communication conducted through cameras and tinny microphones.

Another important factor linking each of the articles in this issue is how they examine the role of digital platforms in the mediation of lockdown communication online. The platform capitalist model has gradually grown in prominence online since the mid-2000s with the advent of major social networking and video hosting sites. During the 2010s this process continued to shape the nature of user-generated media online through the corporate conglomeration of popular social platforms and the booming popularity of YouTube. Meanwhile, streaming platforms for music, TV and film rebuilt the distribution model for more traditional media, all but completely killing the peer-to-peer culture that had previously replaced it. By 2020, platform owners were well-positioned to take advantage of the conditions brought about by lockdown, expanding their social, cultural and economic influence as millions of users were forced to retreat into online spaces for work, communication and comfort.

Platformisation has been described as 'the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life' as well as simply a 'reorganisation of practices and imaginations around platforms' (Poell et al. 2019). In this way, despite growing rapidly the internet is also becoming more homogenous, as a small number of incredibly powerful and far-reaching corporations have come to control a relatively small number of extremely popular services and social platforms. Each platform's particular limitations and affordances also play a central role in

shaping the content hosted and mediated on those platforms. Where most online socialising, discussion content creation and other cultural activity once took place across a vast variety of largely independent forums, websites and blogs, now many of the most notable and influential aspects of online culture take place on giant, corporate platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Tumblr and Instagram. By fostering certain communities and cultural modes, these platforms exert significant power on online cultural practice, an influence made all the more powerful by their ability to absorb and assimilate the practices, cultures and communities of users that had previously gathered in a larger number of smaller, less centralised digital locations.

But despite the continued acceleration of the platformisation process during the COVID-19 pandemic, the scholarship in this special issue demonstrates that even under these circumstances, the evolution and development of media practices is still as driven by users as it is by the platforms on which they exist. Our contributors examine numerous video-based content creators from bedroom musicians to the Hollywood elite and their innovative, frequently blended use of platforms and platform affordances to express themselves under exceptional circumstances. Despite the homogenising influence of platform capitalism, internet users are still able to successfully produce and disseminate media with a broad range of purposes from artistic expression at both the professional and amateur level to niche and mainstream content designed to appeal to the sensibilities and requirements of pandemic-stricken audiences. In this context, we are very excited to present four fascinating articles written by scholars from around the world.

In our first article, Rachel Berryman investigates intersections between lockdown entertainment, celebrity and nostalgia by turning her analytical focus towards Josh Gad's charity film reunion specials, *Reunited Apart*. Building on previous scholarly work around nostalgic consumption and celebrity fandom, Berryman examines how Gad capitalised both on his status as a well-connected film star and elements of his specific personal brand to respond to the lockdown-induced audience demand for comfort media. In her consideration of comfort media aesthetics Berryman posits that nostalgia is seen as a fallback when one's selfhood is threatened; and *Reunited Apart* is specifically designed to 'both trigger and indulge the audience's desire' for comforting media from the past. We particularly think you will enjoy her discussions of the 'Zoom aesthetic' – a new global cultural touchstone that renders Gad's celebrity guests more relatable than ever, normalising technical difficulty and social awkwardness at the same time as offering intimate glimpses into the private homes and lives of the celebrity elite. This new approach is combined with long existing trends of '80s nostalgia through Josh Gad's role as 'fanboy auteur' and audience surrogate (Salter and Stanfill 2020; Scott 2012), seamlessly blending the lockdown-specific media experience with more established affective strategies to seemingly philanthropic ends. In *Reunited Apart*, Gad successfully maintains his relatable, dorky, good-natured personal brand even as (thanks to social media), the economic and lifestyle divides between celebrities and the public have perhaps never been more evident.

Our second article, by Steven Buckley, also focusses on the strategies for producing comfort media during lockdown, delving deeper into the concept of 'digital intimacy' and arguing that its 'importance and value' has been transformed during the pandemic. Buckley uses his expertise in political communication and news values to frame a critical overview and content analysis of COVID-19 themed autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) videos, many of which perform a function a similar to an intimate digital roleplay exercise, offering their audience a sense of both physical and contextual comfort. The results of Buckley's inquiry reflect an uneasy relationship between the drive of content creators to capitalise on existing trends, and the constraints of the YouTube algorithm and Google's official policies regarding monetisation on videos deemed to be COVID-19 related. In addition to acting as a good introduction to the fascinating media form of ASMR content, the findings of this article clearly demonstrate the need for further scholarly work on the motivations of creators engaged in the production of 'coping' content focussed on relaxation, escapism and support to audiences in deeply distressing times, while also navigating an online environment in which independent creators exist at the mercy of uncaring and unpredictable corporate and algorithmic power structures.

Our third article continues the issue's exploration of pandemic media with an examination of the affordances and challenges of digital theatre during the pandemic. Hayley Louise Charlesworth discusses the production of online content in 2020 by theatre company *Starkid Productions* as a future model for the creation of accessible and profitable theatre, with a specific focus on strategies for designing and disseminating musical theatre in the context of online video. Charlesworth's research interests typically focus on the contemporary and/or queer Gothic, but in this article she takes a step back from the manifest content of her subject (comedy-horror series *Nightmare Time*), looking instead at the circumstances surrounding its development, performance and monetisation of the show. Key among the article's contributions is its insight into the practicalities of performing live music on the internet: compensating for technological factors such as poor connectivity, lag and sound issues, as well as potential discomfort from actors who are no longer able to create music in the same room as each other. Many of these threads are continued in the following article's exploration of video-mediated jam sessions, and additional depth is also provided through Charlesworth's interview with one of *Starkid*'s regular actors, which is provided in full as an appendix.

Our final article, from Bondy Kaye also makes effective use of interview to engage with the logistical challenges of mediating collaborative artistic expression via digital video platforms. Kaye borrows approaches from platform studies to demonstrate the relationship between specific platform tools in the creation and maintenance of a loose, jam-based musical collective on TikTok. The app's fast paced, highly reflexive culture has generated several notable moments of musical virality during the pandemic, but rather than analysing a single trend or example, Kaye looks towards JazzTok, a community based around continued collaboration and focussed on a specific genre of music. As a genre focussed on immediacy, intimacy and close collaboration, Jazz is perhaps uniquely suited to the new modes of digital mediation represented by short-form video apps. Kaye argues that the JazzTok community's use of a

blend of platform affordances and independent community management have been able to foster a form of 'distributed creativity' on the platform. Focussing on a collectively managed TikTok account specifically developed by users to act as a hub for musical creativity, Kaye is able to track the account's emotional and professional impact of this community on its members, reporting a 'real, tangible impact on the personal lives and professional careers' of nineteen informants. Thanks to a blend of existing platform affordances end the organisational efforts of key community members, each of these individual musicians were able to productively engage with a new community during the pandemic, despite their considerable diversity of experience in music making, digitally mediated or otherwise.

Though they are concerned with a range of cultural products, platforms and academic framing devices, there are numerous meaningful connections between the papers in this special issue, beyond the shared context of lockdown. As outlined above, each contribution shares some common themes or elements with those either side, but links can also be drawn between the non-adjacent articles that shine yet more light on the collective experiences and struggles that took place in the production of online media during the early stages of the pandemic. For example, the first and third articles focus on previously offline or live media forms moved onto a combination of Zoom and YouTube during COVID, in both cases a mobilising the existence of an audience from previous work to maintain the success and momentum of the creator during a period of turmoil for artists of all kinds. The same might also be said of JazzTok, as it is in many ways a transplant of pre-digital musical practice into a video-mediated platform environment, but on the other hand, musical collaboration and creativity was a core aspect of TikTok culture before the pandemic. Similar musical actitvity was already under way on TikTok by the end of 2019, positioning the platform at the cutting edge of online music promotion and audience engagement, giving activity like that on JazzTok a particularly complex relationship with the pandemic. ASMR is certainly the most internet-specific genre under scrutiny in this issue, meaning that while the other articles offer insight into the ways a shift to online video can impact various media forms, Steven Buckley's article can provide a small but important comparison between the aesthetic and economic dynamics of online content pre- and post-pandemic.

This special issue brings together a fascinating range of cultural touchpoints from the pandemic, but the insights of each paper extend far beyond the difficult times we find ourselves in. We'd like to thank the *Networking Knowledge* editors, the peer-reviewers and most of all, the contributors, for their patience, dedication and collegiality throughout the process of creating this issue. We are incredibly proud to present their work to you and hope this issue will inspire academic discussion and further investigations into the case studies presented.

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