

**Communication in Global Crises: Critical Discourses on Consumption, Culture, Power,  
and Resistance**

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*We'll meet again*

*Don't know where*

*Don't know when*

*But I know we'll meet again some sunny day*— Ross Parker and Hughie

Charles (singer: Vera Lynn)

The lines from the above song take us back to the WW II crisis and the hope (Halderman, 1943) that unfolded alongside 1939 and changed the world forever in more ways than we could ever contemplate. In a televised address to Britain and the Commonwealth on April 5, 2020, Queen Elizabeth II referred to Lynn's song while expressing her gratitude for the efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic virus and acknowledging the significant challenges faced by families around the world (The Queen, 2020). Two different historical moments of global crisis thus

got conflated into one. The war devastation of one, like the *sanitus* riddles of the other, from post-war to post-COVID era, both had lessons to provide to the market. However, generally, memories, good or bad, fade away. Any unpacking of the chronology of human history indicates two phenomena: the inevitable cadence of apocalypse and the amnesiac populace.

Such amnesia towards human history is explicit in the academic fields of marketing (Tadajewski and Saren, 2008) and communication/media studies (Basu, 2018), the two epistemic spaces that converge in this Special Issue. Late modernity and its unbridled commodification and consumerism, among other things, has been instrumental in “social amnesia” (Jacoby, 1975). This Special Issue does not claim to remedy amnesia towards any crisis of global magnitude in the market; rather, it tries to trace the consumption, culture, and power dynamics during such crises, and how they are communicated in the market sphere. In particular, the papers explore the intersectionality of collective precarity and the realities of market, consumption, and culture, as imagined through communication's praxis. We focus on the power imbalances that flow from the perpetual mechanism of consumer vulnerabilities (Hill & Sharma, 2020) and manifest in market-based communication practices. Such an approach, we hope, keeps structuralized social amnesia into global issues at bay and any valorization of a “recency-only” attitude in check. As evidenced in the papers submitted and the roundtable discussion that we include, the issue helps us connect the present with the past, recent events with memory invocation, and reconsider organisation-consumer relationships during a crisis in a more holistic manner. Importantly, consumption or identity performance as a communication practice during a crisis also helps the authors diagnose subaltern issues from the Global North and the Global South markets and the communication paradigm around them during crises. They highlight the ignored, marginal subjects in the market and their culture, the amnesia towards their subjectivity at the market periphery during a global crisis, and their undermined sovereignty (Spivak, 1988).

Crises manifest in various shapes: pandemics to economic recession, geo-political conflicts, or climate change (e.g., The International Debt Crisis of 1982, the Asian Crisis of 1997-2001, the Economic Recession of 2007-2009, the Gulf War, the tsunami of 2004, the 9/11 attack, the COVID-19 pandemic, geo-political events like the Russia-Ukraine War). These events emerge as a ‘black swan’ for which the market, and its actors are not (or perhaps will never be) fully prepared. Crises of global proportions are not unique in world history. Still, the suddenness with which such crisis seems to emerge inflicts us psychosomatically: herein, the body often emerges as the site of passage and porosity (Butler, 2016), and the resultant sufferings of the mind cross the individual limits of bodily boundary. The suffering emerges as overarching, temporal, and overwhelming experiences.

The enormity of the impact of these events goes beyond the loss of lives and includes various forms of social injustice, collective apathy, and insularity. In a connected world, experiences of vulnerability have persisted through crises; COVID-19, in particular, exposed the weakness of market apparatus to ensure justice and access to resources, especially in the context of the Global South (Kelley et al., 2020). The aporia of angst and fallible collective memory (Casey, 2004) are fertile breeding grounds for perpetual suffering.

Given these realities, we suggest that the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) of a world-turned-upside-down by crisis, calls for a radical reimagining of what constitutes markets, consumers, and consumption and what it means to communicate in such redefined settings. It becomes imperative to probe how consumers relate to markets, make demands of organizations as social and cultural actors rather than only economic agents, and accept or challenge consumption culture. For example, the current COVID-19 situation compels a re-interpretation of markets as “political sites of contestation where various stakeholder groups compete for resources—economic, political, and symbolic” (Mumby, 2016). To stabilize the VUCA effect of the global crisis and control the individual idiosyncratic

responses to the same, markets, generally, have taken recourse to the Tannenbaumian conceptualization of “control” (Tannenbaum, 1968, 3), whereby structured influence over fringe-actors of the market have been increased to enable a greater degree of their integration in the market. However, any such control in a post-Fordist liquid modern world (Bauman, 2000)— where the markets must move away from solid structures to virtual online processes, employees have evolved to knowledge workers from industrial laborers, and the economy has moved beyond stability to become a gig-economy—is conditioned by ideologically-designed communication structures (Mumby, 2015). The COVID-19 that has reified a liquid market system has no less promulgated the hegemonic capillaries of control through communication, market redefinition (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Hewer, 2022), and consumption. Yet, there is also evidence of counter-discourses and practices that resist and subvert hegemonic market narratives during the crisis.

This Special Issue goes beyond the surface-level realities of business communication around markets and consumers during a global crisis to examine the ideological impact of such communication. For example, communication researchers focused on COVID-19 have highlighted aspects of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in a flipped normal condition (viz. work-from-home [Larson, et al., 2020; Raišienė, et al., 2020; Valet, 2020], marketing communication’s shift to the digital and social media platforms [Balis, 2020; Mheidly and Fares, 2020; Taylor, 2020a; Taylor, 2020b], and insistence on AI and digitally mediated communication replacing face-to-face communication [Marr, 2020; Sivasubramanian, 2020]). There have also been unquestioning assumptions of the ‘positive/effective vibes’ of strategized crisis/risk communication in an organization (Argenti, 2020; Holtom et al., 2020; Honigmann et al., 2020). This list suggests that the literature on communication (and associated crises) at the intersection of ideological discourses, dialectics, and perhaps dystopia (Bradshaw et al., 2021) has come a long way. But, research that crosses

consumption, markets, culture, and communication during a crisis remains novel, and in this Special Issue we reinforce the value of placing power at the centre of such analyses, examining the hegemonic communication practices of powerful market actors during global crises and exploring the disruptive, resistive counter-communications by marginalized and coerced consumers/actors that highlight the inequalities and power dynamics produced through such communication.

An example of such communication practice, within a market structure and conditioned by a dominant patriarchal culture, is state-sponsored public relations or public policies ignoring the gendered impact of COVID-19 that treats women laborers as disposable or unwanted receivers of communication and ignore the work-life balance and psychosomatic well-being of these subaltern market actors (European Network of Migrant Women 2020; Lewis, 2020). The concerns are far graver if women belong to the subaltern sections of refugees, asylum seekers, geriatric population, and service providers of precarious trade (European Network of Migrant Women 2020). On the other end of the spectrum, we have a more disruptive example where the CEO and President of Boston Pride, Linda DeMarco, negotiated the otherwise hegemonic scopes of computer-mediated communication to host a Zoom Pride Party with online dance parties, digital drag shows, and online pride networking (Tavares, 2020).

This authors in this special issue all deploy a critical lens to unpack the devices of market imperfection and consumer discourses of resistance, which shape communication and configure the politics of crisis and social imagination (Schulz, 2016) that include markets, consumers, and consumption. They revisit concepts and theories to address the increasing global paranoia (Liu, 2021) and politics of erasure, successfully bringing out the gestalt in our everyday thinking and positing solid arguments in favor of critical communication discourse. In the following section, we summarize the contributions for the benefit of our readers.

## **The articles**

The issue opens with a virtual roundtable discussion of the broad themes informing the special issue. Dennis Mumby, Debashish Munshi and Clea Bourne, all leading scholars in the fields of critical communication studies, markets and their operations, joined the editors to discuss the way power imbalances and resistances take shape during global crises, prompting a rethink of market-culture convergence both during and after the actual moment of crisis. The discussion focuses on how market discourses from the centre are deployed during crises, through performances, narratives, and communications by market actors that contribute to the unfolding situation. Placing power imbalances between centre and margin at the heart of the discussion, the participants reflect on the role of the market and the ethics around consumption; the algorithmic principles of profit-oriented capitalism during the crisis and the resistive responses to the same; the ways in which neoliberalism instils ontological insecurities in the consumer during a crisis; and the various subversions that counter these feelings of instability. They reflect on the role of organizational communication within these contexts, and the power/knowledge with which it is invested as it is used to negotiate the challenges and tensions that arise during crisis events. The possibilities of alternative discourse that subverts the capitalist agenda of the market during a crisis, including possibilities of transformations, especially in the Global South, are heralded as decolonizing moves that strengthen indigenous perspectives of market performances. That said, and while the discussants note several cases where market subalterns extend an alternative narrative during global crises, the spectre of resistance being appropriated by the hegemonic market persists.

Iqani and Kenny take as their focus the context of South Africa, where the pandemic, though worse than most crises, was nonetheless part of a pattern of crises that the population regularly endured. Taking as their case the protests and lootings that occurred mid-2021, they adopt a long view of events, noting the specific context of South African apartheid as a mode

of exclusion often focused on markets, the role of consumption as a locus of aspiration and inclusion in contemporary societies, and the commonplace nature of looting in many post-crisis moments, illustrative of the ways that this kind of ‘deviant consumption’ can also be understood as a form of resistance by those forced to the periphery of the marketplace. Through a discourse analysis of four iconic videos of the looting that circulated widely on South African social media, they show how participants used humour and reframed looting as an exercise in freedom that ignores the rules and surveillance of market participation. In the context of South Africa, these presentations allow participants to highlight the social inequalities and broken promises that they are subjected to by government and assert their agency as citizens and consumers. At the same time, their actions sustain the market and all its imperfections as a space where true freedom might be obtained in a more equal world. As the authors argue, the looting and its narratives ‘speak to the pathos of South African desire, belonging and futures in the face of pandemic pessimism and enduring, indeed deepening, inequalities’.

Surveillance and resistance are given new perspectives in Dutta and Rahman’s article. The article focuses on the immigrant Bangladeshi laborers working in Singapore, and its, and the ways their actions and communication subvert the governmentality and its hegemonic communication during COVID-19. Contrary to its narratives of an equity-enabling, emancipatory, power-rebalancing, participatory, digital smart-city (Kong-Woods, 2018), the Singapore model of smart-city making, promulgated by the government, promotes the erasure of migrant workers. The neoliberal, smart-urban repression of the workers, including any their communicative infrastructures that might allow them to voice agency, is documented and analysed by the authors through ethnography and in-depth interviews. The research utilises Dutta’s Culture Centred Approach (CCA) (Dutta, 2008) to create a register of resistance from the margin of the market, enabling migrant worker voices to subvert “colonial, capitalist, racist and patriarchal systems of organizing political, economic, social, and cultural resources”

during COVID-19, and connecting their health and well-being with the communicative infrastructure. The paper is an extension of broader CCA research activism that mobilizes secure (communicative) infrastructure for subaltern market participants.

Just as in the Global South, late capitalism can accentuate anxiety and crisis among hapless consumers in the markets of the Global North by inducing overwhelming self-actualization. Takhar's analysis of the creation of reproductive hyper-anxiety among consumers seeking children, engineered through narratives of bioprecarity and infertility, argues against the discursively constructed crisis and highlights a lack of consumer awareness and consumer-driven campaigning against the same. Takhar touches upon the ideologies of perfect parenting, as furthered by the neoliberal market and ascertained by the media, and analyses how artificial reproductive technology (ART) is presented as a solution for consumer needs. The commentary opens spaces for new research that can focus on consumer resistance, ethics around ART marketing communication, and consumer rights to bias-free information.

The piece by Dholakia et.al. is equally sharp in its criticism of multiplicity and spread of information. Drawing an analogy from the European middle-age conjecture (or the lack of it) about the mechanism of the spread of diseases, the authors argue that the current epidemic of information is precisely devastating in its effects, as the consuming society overlooks the virulence of uncontrolled viral information in this age of social media. While freedom of speech has been a major point of debate in political terms, these arguments at the intersection of marketization, governance, and morality of information consumption will perhaps become even more relevant as the world moves from one crisis to another. The paper is particularly successful in building up this particular argument and opening spaces for a new contribution in this fledgling area of inquiry.

Taken as a whole, the roundtable and papers cover a wide range of starting points for thinking about the ways in which markets, organisations and consumers converge in



communicative spaces, manifest through communication, and leverage communication for their own purposes during global crises.. We hope readers find inspiration in these ideas, methods and reflections to continue research on their variable effects and the ways in which communication can facilitate or shut down opportunities for pursuing more equitable and just outcomes for all, during global crises.

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