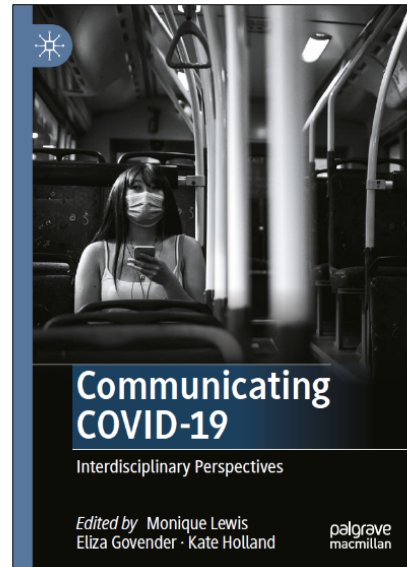


Monique Lewis, Eliza Govender, and Kate Holland (Eds.), **Communicating COVID-19: Interdisciplinary Perspectives**, London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 395 pp., \$252.83 (hardcover).

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As Monique Lewis, Eliza Govender, and Kate Holland, the editors of **Communicating COVID-19: Interdisciplinary Perspectives**, say, COVID-19 is “the most profoundly communicated and mediatized health event ever witnessed in human history” due to the use and reach of social media and the Web, as well as traditional media (p. 1). It is not surprising, then, that a plethora of scholarly journal articles, research reports, and books have sprung into print, and many more can be expected. Beyond the growing body of health and medical literature, even a cursory search reveals a number of books examining communication in relation to COVID-19 (Kopecka-Piech & Łódzki, 2022; MacNeil-Kelly, 2021; Sinha, 2022), as well as journal articles and research reports (e.g., Hyland-Wood, Gardner, Leask, & Ecke, 2021; Moss & Konstantinova, 2021; Prieto-Ramos, Pei, & Cheng, 2020; to name but a few).



Some texts have been rushed into print to take advantage of what is widely recognized as an existential global crisis and a focal point of global attention across all sectors of society. Others attempt to be more reflective as the world enters the third year of the pandemic. This edited volume is a contribution to the latter.

In what Waisbord (2019) refers to as the “shapeless immensity of communication studies” (p. 1), this analysis focusses on *public communication*, not clinician-patient or patient-provider-caregiver interpersonal communication, as important as these are. In particular, this edited volume examines journalism and health communication that “connects communication studies to public health, social psychology, health education and promotion, community health, social marketing, and behavioural studies” (Waisbord, 2019, p. 13).

The subtitle points to one of the claimed features of this volume—to present interdisciplinary perspectives. The extent to which this is achieved is open to question, as 30 of the 33 contributing authors are communication and media scholars with research interests in the closely related fields of journalism, media studies, public relations, public sector communication, political communication, and health communication, with just three having backgrounds in public health, medical research, and law. Nevertheless, this focus is perhaps appropriate in a book about public communication. As could be expected, there is close examination of digital communication through social media, as well as websites and, pleasingly, attention is paid to structural inequality, disability, and cultural factors, as well as recognition of the social dimensions of health (Dutta, 2021).

These perspectives are presented in three sections focused on (1) news media and journalism, (2) health communication, and (3) citizens use of social and digital media for information (and misinformation) seeking. Thus, scholars in a range of fields and research streams will find chapters of interest.

What is not said in the title but is clear in the chapters and the authors' affiliations, is the multinational perspectives presented. This is perhaps the most substantive contribution to our understanding of how COVID-19 was communicated to and by citizens across various cultures. Chapters discuss COVID-19 related public communication in Austria, Australia, Denmark, India, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, the UK, including England and Wales, and the United States, along with case studies from some other regions including Taiwan, Province of China.

The first section notes a resurgence of news audiences consuming traditional news media during the pandemic, but in response to an atrophying of journalism in recent decades, concludes that there is an urgent need for journalists to adopt a public interest approach and expand public interest journalism. This is described as involving "high-speed fact-checking, information and insights from expert sources, and investigation and interrogation of social and economic impacts on citizens and systems" (p. 6). This section, written by Melissa Sweet, Megan Williams, Ruth Armstrong, and Marie McInerney, optimistically argues that there is "a unique opportunity to reimagine journalism as part of a wider reconfiguring of society in response to a convergence of global crises" (p. 31) with calls for a whole-of-society approach involving collaboration and co-production of news with community-centered organizations as well as experts in fields such as health.

One of the most topical and widely discussed issues during the pandemic is dealt with in a chapter tracing misinformation and disinformation trajectories from fringe origins to mainstream media and public discourse, which provides some counter-intuitive findings. Predictable findings are presented confirming that conspiracy theories such as claims that COVID-19 was deliberately bioengineered in China and that 5G mobile telephony contributed to the spread of the virus start "from very small beginnings" on "a handful of websites that are fringe . . . news outlets" (p. 244). However, surprisingly, recent research shows that the followers of sites advancing misinformation and disinformation do not increase significantly after popularization of false narratives. So how does misinformation and disinformation spread into popular culture? Studies reported by Axel Bruns, Stephen Harrington, and Edward Hurcombe uncover two culprits. First, misinformation and disinformation escape from the confines of fringe sites when a celebrity, often naively, repeats the claims. This, in turn, attracts the attention of entertainment media whose practitioners do not adhere to the same standards of fact-checking as news reporters and investigative journalists. As Bruns, Harrington, and Hurcombe say, entertainment news outlets and what they refer to as celebrity journalism often pursue sensationalist coverage. These findings in relation to entertainment media warrant further research and address within media studies.

Another chapter by John Flood and Monique Lewis in the section dealing with digital communication examines the "datafication of people" during the pandemic through contact tracing, which the authors note "raised the issue of tracking infected individuals to a level not seen before with the exception of surveillance in China" (p. 346). Key concerns explored include consent and particularly what happens to these data after the pandemic has ended. The authors note the massive amount of data about people that has been collected, with no assurances from governments that these data will be destroyed or sequestered.

Another interesting aspect of this volume is the deployment of innovative research methods. Along with an autoethnographic report from inside “the COVID-19 maelstrom” by a health worker in South Africa by Warren Parker (pp. 119–138), collaborative approaches to news gathering included use of *video diaries* recorded by health workers in hospitals that were edited into TV news bulletins on the BBC. These provided footage from inside ICUs without the intrusion of a reporter and TV crew, which the authors raise as a matter of practical and ethical concern for journalists. Also, the chapter by Maria Kyriakidou, Marina Morani, Nikki Soo, and Stephen Cushion reported an *online diary study* in which 200 participants recorded their response to TV reporting of COVID-19 in two diary entries a week over six weeks (pp. 41–58). The viewer diaries included emotional language and the broadcast video diaries presented often confronting scenes, which posed risks of emotional overload and news avoidance. On the other hand, these methods contributed a raw, authentic dimension to communication.

In their introduction, the editors state that the critical question addressed was “how communication positively and negatively affects our capacities and willingness, our limitations and potential, to adapt to life in a pandemic-afflicted world” (p. 5). It is refreshing to read frank accounts of the negatives and difficult challenges of public communication and how these can be addressed, rather than glowing accounts of the importance and success of communication that characterizes many collections of case studies. This is an often raw and provocative collection of studies worthy of the attention of journalism and media studies scholars, health communication researchers and professionals, and public health officials.

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