

Stuart Price and Ben Harbisher (Eds.), **Power, Media and the Covid-19 Pandemic: Framing Public Discourse**, London, UK: Routledge, 2022, 273 pp., \$44.95 (paperback), \$160.00 (hardback), \$40.45 (ebook).

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Power, Media and the Covid-19 Pandemic: Framing Public Discourse is an edited collection by Stuart Price and Ben Harbisher comprised of five parts with 14 chapters that provide an interdisciplinary critique of the acts of public communication disseminated during the Covid-19 crisis. The subjects of this book include the performance of the “mainstream” media, the quality of political “messaging” and argumentation, the securitized state and racism in Brazil, the growth of “catastrophic management” in UK universities, emergent journalistic practices in South Africa, homelessness and punitive dispossession, the pandemic and the history of eugenics, and the Chinese media’s coverage of discriminatory practices.

Power, media, and the Covid-19 pandemic are concepts that have increasingly been central to the debate on global affairs since early 2020. The introduction to this volume locates these concepts within “political time” and “pandemic time,” where a power struggle takes place between government censorious and bureaucratic attitude toward information and models of passive citizenship: unregulated vs. official communication. The book considers the media as the key domain to knowing, understanding, and reacting to the pandemic. It also considers the media as a domain for conspiracy theories and misinformation. Therefore, the forces of state regulations are not only up against the pandemic but also against massive risks of fake news and disinformation, particularly on social media (pp. 11–12, 41, 76–79).

Following an extensive introduction, which establishes the analysis of the various impacts of the pandemic, including economic disasters and the global human cost, the text is divided into five parts. However, while the title signposts power, media, Covid-19, and framing public discourse, which ostensibly are markers of a wider and holistic approach to the topic, the focus of the book is rather heavily on the UK. Part 1 focuses on the “pandemic historical, medical and racial configurations.” This includes three essays: The first, by Graham Murdock, is entitled “Killing Fields: Pandemics, Geopolitics and Environmental Emergency” (pp. 1–22), and the second essay, by Ben Harbisher, one of the editors, is on “Biopolitics, Eugenics and the New State Racism” (pp. 22–55). Harbisher examines the notion of eugenics as a means of social control during the coronavirus pandemic in the UK. The third essay, by Zhou Yang and Na Yuqi, examines the representation of Chinese mainstream media of the maltreatment of African nationals in Guangzhou during the Covid-19 pandemic (pp. 55–69). The authors, while providing rich analysis of the



subject, burden their essay with an extended account of the good relations between China and Africa by selecting statements on solidarity and brotherhood between China and African countries.

Part 2, entitled "Power, Crisis, and Repression," consists of three essays. The first, by Ben Whitham, focuses on the cultural politics of crisis in the UK (pp. 69–86). The second, by Stuart Price, is titled "UK Universities During Covid-19: Catastrophic Management, 'Business Continuity,' and Education Workers" (pp. 86–123). Price, one of the editors of the book, introduces a new working definition of "power": "to refer to both the routine and the 'exceptional' exercise of decisive institutional influence over the behavior of university employees" (p. 111). He explains how executive influence is exercised within a sector that has, in recent years, embraced an aggressive approach to workforce management and, due to the pandemic, is engaged in forcing through large numbers of redundancies. He analyzes those external factors that shape "universities' managerial decisions" (pp. 89–91) and how they affect the structural reproduction of authority in those universities in light of the pandemic. The essay acknowledges that there is a rapid moral deterioration of the sector and attributes that to a *malignant executive agency* (the use of "authoritarian managerialism"; p. 111), which is "the instrument that keeps the flow of capital and expertise moving in the preferred direction—from the (so-called) public to the private realm" (p. 90). The third essay, by Fernanda Amaral, examines "Covid-19, Police Brutality and the Systematic Targeting of the Black and Disadvantaged Population in Brazil" (pp. 123–137).

Part 4 is on British political discourse during the pandemic. It entails three essays: The first is entitled "The BBC and Covid-19: The Politicization of a Pandemic?" (pp. 193–206). The second essay analyzes the government's daily coronavirus news conferences, and the third is on "Mortality, Blame Avoidance and the State: Constructing Boris Johnson's Exit Strategy" (pp. 220–235). In this essay, Leighton Andrews explains how Johnson's "heroic leadership model, and its associated imagery, has been actively constructed through management of the Government's narrative" (p. 222). Correspondingly, Andrews explains the important role played by conservative newspapers in supporting Johnson's conservative government.

Part 5 is on homelessness and disposition during the pandemic and includes two essays: The first poses the question of whether the problem of "homelessness rough sleeping in the UK and Europe [has] been solved in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic" (pp. 237–249). The answer is that despite intensive efforts by organizations and charities that work with homeless people to end street homelessness both in England and Europe, the problem has not been permanently solved (pp. 240–246). The second essay is on "Leper Islands: Coronavirus and the Homeless 'Other'" (pp. 249–263), which "theorizes the discourses around the homeless prior to, during and after the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK" (p. 249). The author, Simon Stevens, uses the idea of Foucault's regulatory power to explain the predominance of punishing dispersal methods (pp. 249, 252–253). Stevens highlights those measures that the government applied in what he calls antihomless "hostile public spaces" (p. 251). Therefore, despite the impact of the pandemic on the homeless, in light of Foucault's biopolitics, homelessness is still considered a public health threat and the problem remains unsolved.

Part three, "Journalism, Information, and Structures of Argument During Covid-19," is critical to the study of media, power, and framing public discourse. It underlines challenges to journalism and

emphasizes the gravity of evidence-based reporting during the pandemic. It includes three essays: The first, by Jen Birks, is entitled "Just Following Science: Fact-Checking Journalism and the Government's Lockdown Argumentation" (pp. 137–159). The UK is the focus in this essay. The second essay, by Allen Munoriyarwa, is on "The Burden of Responsibility: Investigative Journalism in South Africa During the Covid-19 Crisis" (pp. 159–175). And the third, by Thaiane Oliveira, Rodrigo Quinan, Juliana Gagliardi, and Afonso de Albuquerque, is on "Covid, Institutional Crisis and Information Wars in Brazilian Journalism—the *Folha de São Paulo* Newspaper" (pp. 175–191).

For Birks, "the global coronavirus pandemic has restored the rhetorical prominence of 'evidence-based policymaking' in the UK, after the misleading and propagandistic argumentation of the EU Referendum and its aftermath [Brexit]" (p. 139). Birks emphasizes the role of science, noting that the focus of the reporting on Covid-19 was on conveying the potential measures being considered to slow the spread of the virus and the various mitigations being prepared in case of public services being overwhelmed (p. 150).

The second essay attempts to answer two questions: In what ways has the outbreak of Covid-19 disrupted the practice of investigative journalism in South Africa's mainstream media? And how has it opened windows of opportunities for investigative journalists? (p. 159). The answers are interrelated where the pandemic has "strengthened collaborative journalism" (p. 166), which was necessitated by the conditions brought about by the pandemic. These same conditions also provide an answer to the second question as the pandemic has prompted the resurrection of health news investigative journalism practices, which in turn "has opened up even more important opportunities that may outlast Covid-19 itself" (p. 169). The third essay answers the question of "how Brazil's legacy print media dealt with Bolsonaro and the triple crisis associated with his ascension to power: a health crisis, a political crisis and an informational crisis" (p. 176). However, one of the most important moments in the book can be found in the introduction, which illustrates that

the regular appearance of authoritative individuals, however—political figures accompanied by medical experts—was a major feature of media coverage, which drew its basic data and analytical frames from government news conferences and "Q&As." These ritualistic communication practices, which tried to give the impression (mediated by journalists and other professional interlocutors) of an exchange between the political elite and the people, were not the unique product of the pandemic emergency. As a form of theatre, they were seen by some leaders not just as an opportunity to disseminate information but as a vital tool for the maintenance of social cohesion. (p. xxiii)

The book's title covers a wider range of urgently debated issues, yet, the focus on the UK, Brazil, and South Africa did not correspond to its ambitious title. The essay on China does not touch on "framing the public discourse" in China. However, the book remains rich in informed and well-researched discussion on the topics that are recorded in its essays.