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Author(s): Reilly, Paul; Salojärvi, Virpi

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(De)constructing societal threats during times of deep mediatization

Paul Reilly
Senior Lecturer
School of Social and Political Sciences
University of Glasgow

Virpi Salojärvi
Assistant Professor
School of Marketing and Communication
University of Vaasa
Affiliated Researcher
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Helsinki

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This special issue focuses on mediatizations of societal threats in the era of hybrid media. Mediatization is a theoretical framework which has evolved somewhat in parallel with media ecologies. It was originally defined as the “growing intrusion of media logic as an institutional rule into fields where other rules of defining appropriate behavior prevailed” (Esser & Matthes, 2013, p. 177). Much of the early work in this area focused on the processes whereby modern media constrained and directly influenced the behavior of political actors (Maurer & Pfetsch, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008), as well as other institutions like the military (Maltby, 2012). However, this arguably goes much further than media-centric approaches which privilege the internationalization of media logics over other factors. Kissas (2019, p. 236) disentangles mediatization from this media centrism through the prism of ‘media performativity’ i.e., the ways in which power is wielded within the context of mediatized politics. What is increasingly clear is that we live in deeply mediatized, datafied societies characterized by fragmented audiences that pose a challenge to the hegemony of established media and political institutions (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). While they remain influential in the construction of societal threats, audiences increasingly experience these via platforms that, nominally at least, appear beyond the control of political elites.

Hoskins and O’Loughlin (2015) argue that we are currently in the third phase of mediatization. This new paradigm has seen legacy media and military institutions harness the chaotic dynamics of user-generated content in order to re-assert the agenda-setting power they exercised prior to the social media era. Yet, politicians’ dependence on social media continues to create opportunities for underreported conflicts, such as the Syrian civil war, to appear on parliamentary agendas (Herrero-Jiménez et al., 2018). While it may be overly optimistic to suggest we are witnessing a shift in informational power from elites to non-elites, there do appear to be more fluid opportunity structures for marginalized groups to shape news agendas and be heard online (Chadwick, 2017; Creta, 2021). To this end, scholars such as Zhang (2021) have applied Actor Network Theory (ANT) to theorize the networked relationships between mainstream media, online platforms, and web users in mediatized conflicts. A similar dynamic can be observed in how elite

and non-elite actors used sites like Twitter to curate information flows during crisis situations (Reilly & Vicari, 2021). People experience these events through the content shared via both legacy and digital media outlets. This raises important questions not only about their ability to shape public attitudes and behaviors but also how they should be regulated.

This Special Issue is based on research presented in the Crisis, Security and Conflict Communication working group at the conference of International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) in 2021. It adds to this literature on mediatization by focusing specifically on how societal threats are constructed and deconstructed within deeply mediatized societies. While previous research in the field has tended to focus on how mainstream media and elite institutions have reasserted their agenda-setting power during conflict (see Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015 for example), we focus here on how a range of actors construct societal threats and how audiences respond to these frames. These papers bring together a range of traditional and innovative research methodologies to explore how societal threats are framed within deeply mediatized societies, ranging from content analysis of newspaper coverage of the Macedonian name dispute in Greece to investigating conspiratorial communities on YouTube using Systemic Functional Linguistics. Each one addresses how societal threats are constructed by a variety of actors, using both 'old' and 'new' media technologies within hybrid media ecologies.

Our first article examines how legacy media play a key role in constructing existential threats to contemporary societies. In "Framing the Macedonian Name Dispute in Greece: Nationalistic Journalism and the Existential Threat", Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis argues that media frames continue to exert great influence on public opinion in an era of deep mediatization. Drawing on a content analysis of 615 articles published in 127 news outlets, he provides evidence of how news media shaped people's perceptions of the 2018 Prespes Agreement to settle the 150-year-old Macedonian Name Dispute. Left-leaning publications heralded the agreement between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia as a key achievement of the Syriza-led government. However, the majority of Greek news outlets framed the Agreement as posing a grave threat to Greek democracy and deployed populist frames which depicted then Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras as having committed an act of 'national treason'. Noticeably, Karyotakis finds that the views of North Macedonians about the Agreement were conspicuously absent in coverage which sought to empower ethnic identities within Greece against what was a constructed existential threat to its nationhood.

The other articles in the Special Issue focus on how information and communication technologies (ICTs) are used by non-elite actors to both construct and deconstruct societal threats. "The 'ultimate empathy machine' as technocratic solutionism? Audience reception of the distant refugee crisis through Virtual Reality" examines the mediatization of the refugee crisis. Zhe Xu and Mengrong Zhang critically evaluate the techno-utopian claim that Virtual Reality can help deconstruct barriers and prejudices within contemporary societies by bringing people closer to the suffering of others. Drawing on the results of focus groups and interviews conducted in China, Germany, and the United Kingdom, they interrogate whether the United Nations (UN) VR project can transform audience attitudes toward refugee and migrant communities. They find that VR facilitates ironic consumerism rather than the emergence of cosmopolitan publics who are

empowered to take action to remedy the systemic injustices experienced by migrants and refugees. While people may in theory be closer to this distant suffering, there needs to be a greater focus on how technologies like VR are being used rather than a technological determinism which suggests that their use will create a more empathetic citizenry.

While the UN uses VR to deconstruct negative stereotypes of refugees, uncivil actors use ICTs to exclude and stigmatize those groups that they believe pose a threat to their respective societies. Online platforms in particular have emerged as key communicative spaces for White Supremacists, due in no small part to the tendency for people to experience crisis situations through User-Generated-Content (UGC). Our third paper focuses specifically on how the video-sharing platform YouTube is used to amplify and disseminate White Supremacist discourses. In “A Systemic Functional Linguistics Approach to Analysing White Supremacist and Conspiratorial Discourse on YouTube”, Olivia Inwood and Michele Zappavigna examine the mediatization of these discourses through the case study of the Notre Dame Fire in April 2019. The first study of its kind to use Systemic Functional Linguistics to investigate conspiratorial discourses online, their results show that white supremacists used affiliation strategies to convince audiences that Muslims had deliberately started the fire. While Karyotakis posits that legacy media continues to play a key role in constructing societal threats experienced by citizens, platform affordances enable these conspiratorial communities to appeal to the social bonds and values of their audiences in order to ‘other’ Muslims. Conceivably the amplification and circulation of these conspiracy theories could have negative implications for societal resilience to future crisis situations. Inwood and Zappavigna demonstrate how SFL can provide invaluable insight into the mediatization of such incidents.

Societal resilience towards crises and disasters also concerns the author of our last paper. Mediatization has clearly transformed the nature of crisis situations due to the degree to which citizens’ lives have become entangled with digital media infrastructures. Online platforms empower citizens through the creation of early warning systems and their use to mobilize resources as part of disaster response initiatives (Reilly & Atanasova, 2016). In “Internet Regulation and Crisis-Related Resilience: From Covid-19 to Existential Risks”, Gregory Asmolov asks whether internet regulation might have a detrimental impact on the generative capacity of online platforms during such incidents. Drawing on evidence gathered from 15 COVID-19-related initiatives in Russia, Asmolov argues that the internet regulation introduced in order to counteract mis- and disinformation about the pandemic may counterintuitively diminish the ability of policymakers to leverage the affordances of online platforms during future crises. Asmolov proposes a methodological framework, which focuses on objects, subjects, and platforms as mediating tools, to assess the impact of internet regulation on the capacity of online platforms to facilitate citizen-led initiatives in response to future crises.

Deep mediatization presents both challenges and opportunities for policymakers responding to crises and threats. Both civil and uncivil actors leverage the affordances of ICTs in order to appeal to the values of audiences, who increasingly experience these events through these media technologies. While the extent to which these frames change the attitudes and behaviors of citizens merits further investigation, the papers in this Special Issue undoubtedly enrich our

understanding of how societal threats are both constructed and deconstructed within deeply mediatized societies

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