

Introduction

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BY: **Gary Genosko**, Guest Editor

This special issue commences with **Sebastián Moreno Barreneche**'s study "The Heroes of the Pandemic: On the Discursive Construction of 'the Healthcare Workers' Collective during the Covid-19 Crisis." Focusing on the discursive production of the coronavirus as a villain and the constitution and narrativization of the collective actors known as 'the healthcare workers,' Barreneche exposes the fundamental semiotic mechanisms at work in the largely positive, even heroic, efforts of these frontline workers. Analyzing, in turn, the four mechanisms of segmentation, actorialization, generalization, and axiologization, a rigorous semiotic definition of 'the healthcare workers' as a unit emerges that excavates the cultural contents of these soldier-superheroes and how they are imbued with signifiers of war. In addition, the widespread (across many nations) tradition of applauding healthcare workers, as well as the counter-applause by healthcare workers directed at cooperative citizens, reveals the short-lived nature of such praise and the problematic scapegoating of frontline caregivers as vectors of contagion by their otherwise celebratory neighbors. This points us towards a current cultural mutation in the protests against healthcare facilities such as major urban hospitals (and counter-protests by doctors and nurses) that have erupted within the anti-vaccine movements in Canada, the US, and the UK. In his contribution, **Thomas Bardakis** provides a focused national context in considering the role that humorous memes about Covid-19 played during the lockdowns in Greece. Using a Barthesian approach to imagetext constructions and describing how to read them visually, as well as providing translations into English, Bardakis discovers a range of socio-semiotic scenarios,

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some inter-species (dogs, fish, and their owners), and couple-based relationships under strain, not to mention sarcastic jabs and ironic nods at government bungling, including in the switch to online learning.

In a complex methodological investigation in comparative media studies, “A Semiotic Comparison of Mass Media Representations of the Swine Flu and Covid-19 Pandemics: Observing *Narcissus Narcosis*,” authors **Alin Olteanu**, **Florian Rabitz**, and **Augusté Nalivaiké** undertake an analysis of American newspaper coverage of the swine flu and Covid-19 pandemics, in relation to the question of how to characterize the emergence of social media between 2009-2019. The decisive outpacing of newspapers as news sources by social media in the US reveals the extent to which the pandemic is wrapped in an infodemic. Modeling comparative discursive structures, the authors explore Marshall McLuhan’s sense of numbness to new media forms in the transition from paper to digital media, and the narcotizing effect is felt twofold in the impact of new media as muting awareness of change and preserving a stable correlation between ideology and topics reported. The becoming viral of networked news flows and the enhancement of alarmist messaging nonetheless stabilize when viewed through topic models and networks. As left-right splits remain constant, their clustering habits persist without much innovation at the level of media reporting, with a few distinctive clusters and nodal concentrations during Covid-19. The role of newspapers is to disguise social change; they offer an “anesthetic meant to render the ongoing media change more bearable.” Newspapers are stubborn in their efforts, not always conscious efforts to be sure, to “obscure their integration in the virality of social media networks.”

The viral politics of affect and misinformation is the subject of **Benjamin Bandoz**’s contribution, “Right-Wing Media’s Rendering of Ro: Media, Misinformation, and Affective Contagion.” Utilizing the R-number from epidemiology but “re-tooled” for qualitative deployment as a semiotic model of affect and its influence across the digital and social worlds, Bandoz analyses a series of slogans propagated by Donald Trump and his supporters by mapping their contagiousness and catalytic power to produce new variants. Borrowing from the semiotics of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, this paper also uses the concept of faciality as a molecular bioassemblage, the mucus membranes of which facilitate transfers of fascism and non-discursive resonances of affect. The semiotic lesson is that meaning is hollowed out in the process.

In addition to the Deleuzo-Guattarian white wall/black hole system of the face, there is a semiotics of mucous utilized in poster format to weaponize the handkerchief and militarize the sneezing body. In “Intersensorial translation of coughing-and-sneezing in an epidemic social context,” **George Damaskinidis** situates sneezing historically in the UK during WWII by looking at the public campaign “Sneezes Spread Diseases.” Considering how this poster campaign worked from an intersensorial perspective,

Damaskinidis considers the organization of the senses, the codings of interactions of sneezers and eyewitnesses, and the representation of sneezing as a multisensorial event extending into space. Working with selected posters from this mass personal hygiene campaign aimed at Britons, categories of its operational goals are extracted, and the importance of war production is underlined through the warnings issued, arrangement of auditory signifiers, handkerchief management, and fear of germ colonies. Indeed, the posters signify the lethality of sneezing – by contrast with Bardakis’ findings above concerning Covid memes, is no laughing matter – and the consequences of ignoring safe sneezing practices and the disgust of those sneezed upon is a reduction in the military-industrial labor force. It is remarkable to reflect on the fact that public health messaging during the Covid-19 pandemic, in Canada, for example, where ‘planking the curve’ is fundamentally a public message the goal of which is to protect and respect health care *infrastructure* by inducing a specific set of *rigorous* behaviors in the general population. In WWII, Britons were directed to identify the products of sneezes with the spread of fascism as a kind of atmo-terror. Both the inter- and intra-textualities of these posters are explored in depth.

Roberta Buiani discusses the vicissitudes of modeling Covid-19 in her contribution, “All Models are wrong, but some are useful: mathematical models at the time of COVID-19.” While models have acquired new visibility during the pandemic, they have been criticized as inaccurate and incomplete, even though their usefulness may be found precisely in these two factors. Models are designed to generate scenarios based on established parameters. Still, when such parameters are largely unknown, the best one can hope for is a “relative trust” in their effectiveness, and they may be said to achieve a kind of “temporary certainty.” It is the problem of uncertainty that Buiani emphasizes. It is the very thing that must be faced squarely by both modelers and the public. Yet, it can easily lead to an implosion of confidence and skepticism, especially when certain factors such as long-Covid remain un-modeled, as it was not thought to be among the acute cases that drove the protection of medical infrastructure in such exhortations as ‘plank the curve.’ The theoretical foundations of contagion models tend to recede into the background, especially when they are publicly communicated, not only because communication media does not want to investigate them, or simply that modelers see the real world when they look at their models, a consequence of familiarity with them no doubt. Here the backgrounding of the messenger or mediator is underlined.

Modelers are under pressure to deliver, yet there are many unknowns of a novel coronavirus, which must be admitted and addressed. Buiani counsels honesty and clarity, retracting bad results and cleaning up failures by publishing corrections, as well as sensitivity to the temporal variance of models. New data must be quickly and transparently integrated to avoid the infodemic’s worst excesses that run alongside

the pandemic. She notes some promising developments in these directions with new approaches to model building that have recently emerged and that pay close attention to the dynamics of the pandemic.

The final article in this special issue, “Contagion and Capaciousness: The Shifting Worlds of Living Models,” is my own. Drawing on affect theory, the central question revolves around the status of living models. Donna Haraway famously made the OncoMouse, a living cancer model, a synecdoche for technoscience. Such living research models come with rigorous product specifications, like the PoundMouse, for obesity research. How is it possible to bear witness to a model animal’s relationships that are irreducible to its destiny to develop a disease? Lab animals force us to notice them in other ways – they bite, they excrete, they get mixed up with other sets of animals of the same species in a colony and cause a panic; they stink. We are not lab animals, however, but we can learn from them. Through the introduction of the concept of the parasite, a more fulsome perspective on living models may be taken. Contagion, I argue, is a productive factor in a heterogeneous assemblage that cannot be fully contained in an artifactual lab space. Indeed, this is where things get nicely messy. This paper calls for *dirty* modeling, a wilder understanding, and the practice of living models. To this end, a few examples of the virtues of *dirty mice* are discussed.

Why living models? After all, many of us feel that during the time of Covid, we have become living models. To become a living model, it is unnecessary, for example, to literally volunteer for a human challenge trial for a Covid vaccine and be exposed to a modified infection. This is one direct way of entering into a system of modeling that moves between the *imprecision* of animal and human models. We enter into modeling systems when we are framed as asymptomatic spreaders, subsumed under the reinfection rate, show disease-like illness subject to further investigation, and when we give a sample swab. Does this suggest that we are living in a simulation? Perhaps a cultural matrix perfused with predictive modeling and the highly affective relationships catalyzed by felt qualities of threats, exaggerations, and impingements that bear directly upon embodied experience.

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