

Digital media in crisis situations

Rethinking their role and function

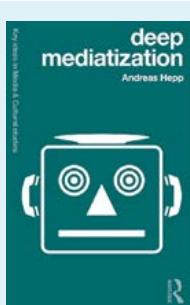
INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus pandemic continues to dominate our news and media, as governments around the world grapple with the crisis and its effects. Scientific advisers have gained high public profiles, with frequent media appearances that emphasise that government policy is 'science-led'. At the same time, the pandemic has coincided with a climate of populism, 'post-truth' and 'fake news', made easier by social media and other digital platforms that can spread misinformation, uncertainty and fear. As a global programme of vaccination gets into full swing, the anti-vax movement is active.

What has been the role of the media, including social media and local news, on our public debate, attitudes and behaviour during this current pandemic? As we emerge from this crisis, could we rethink the role that media and digital platforms play in facilitating the flow of information, as well as the dialogue between experts, policymakers and the public, particularly in emergency situations?

At this special online event held on Wales' national day, St David's Day, on 1st March 2021, our panellists discussed the role of the digital media on our public debate, attitudes and behaviour during the current COVID-19 pandemic. An audience of over 100 joined the webinar from 23 countries across the world. Visit the Academia Europaea Cardiff Knowledge Hub YouTube channel to view the recording.

Key themes



Andreas Hepp's book, *Deep Mediatization*, was published in 2020 by Routledge

This has been a deeply mediatised crisis.

Peoples' *expectations* of the crisis have often been shaped by digital media, such as online film and computer games. Their *experience* of the crisis is affected by media coverage that is frequently dominated by data and statistics, not always deeply analysed, and rumours spread through social media. *Solutions* put forward frequently stem from digital media innovation, such as software and apps that enable home working, or track and trace COVID cases. These have not always fulfilled their early promise.

This has been the first crisis played out not only through mainstream but also social media.

It has led to an unprecedented spread of conspiracy theories and other misinformation, which can ultimately undermine trust in authorities and institutions. Social media platforms are not neutral devices that merely amplify; rather, they select and use information to serve commercial purposes. Consequently, there is a strong selective bias that is not always obvious. Tackling the problem requires a transnational approach.

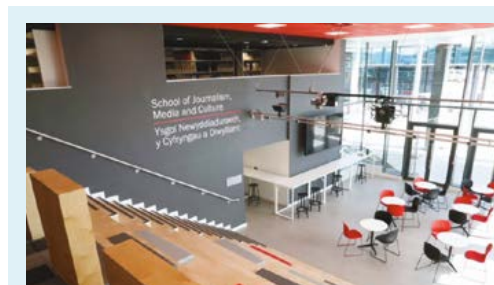
Digital media can be used for better or for worse. Digital media can be helpful in keeping people informed but are unhelpful when it comes to spreading fake news and conspiracy theories. There is also a broader social context at play – social inequality, political polarisation and the decline of trust are all factors.

Algorithms are not neutral; they are programmed with biases that are hidden. Algorithms are made powerful by human interaction, impacting on the presentation of news and online discourse.

The role of media is to reflect and to question governments and authorities.

In Western Europe, we often encounter strong criticism of government responses to the crisis. In nations such as Korea and Japan, there has been less for the media to complain about, as the authorities were generally better prepared to manage the pandemic. As a result, the public have been more inclined to believe that their governments were acting in their interests.

A distinctive role has been played by local and community journalism, which has evolved over the past decade. Lockdown has meant that public focus during the pandemic has often been on the immediate neighbourhood. Consequently, there has been a huge increase in online traffic to local information sources. Good quality news reporting relies on a network of responsible, professional journalists.



Cardiff's School of Journalism, Media and Culture builds strong links with national and local industry, including media organisations like BBC Cymru/Wales

New sustainable business models are needed. Good journalism takes hard work and costs money. Responsible journalism is essential to democracy and is an effective counter to misinformation. Well-established media organisations are an essential part of a democratic society's infrastructure.



The report, *Making Sense of Science for Policy*, examines the evidence on best practices in science advice

Science advice has become highly visible during the pandemic. Scientific experts have not only advised government but have kept the media and the public informed. The nature of science advice during an emergency is very different in terms of the speed of response and the demands made on advisers. The evidence is often incomplete, and advice is being given under conditions of uncertainty. The providers of such evidence must be trusted by the public. This poses a challenge to science advisers, who must be skilled communicators, both to government and to the public.

The media provides opportunities for both good and bad science communication.

For almost the first time, scientists have direct access to the final consumers of information – the public. However, many people have problems in distinguishing between various truth claims in a world that is increasingly complex. They may judge what is 'true' by what, for them, is desirable or convenient. Echo chambers enable the sharing and amplification of misinformation. This poses a problem for both democracy and for effective science communication. One solution is for scientists themselves to take a more active part in social media, which is the main source of news for people below the age of 35. We can reward scientists for using these new channels. For maximum impact, scientific information should be well visualised and based on convincing narratives.

We should get people involved in decision-making processes. Where people are involved and empowered, they are more likely to be fully engaged.

We should teach our students critical reading and media literacy skills, encouraging them to think beyond entirely technical solutions.

For the future, we should anticipate crises much better, by establishing an interdisciplinary team of scientists who are fully prepared and ready to advise government and the public. Certain Asian countries have given us a model that has been shown to work.



authentiSci is the first web browser extension that allows scientists to provide feedback on the validity of science-related news articles.

PANELLISTS



- Professor Andreas Hepp, Professor of Media and Communications at ZeMKI, University of Bremen
- Professor Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, Professor at School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University
- Professor Ortwin Renn, Scientific Director at the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies, Potsdam, and Chair of the SAPEA Working Group on *Making Sense of Science for Policy*
- Dr Nicholas Clifton, Innovator, authentiSci

REPRESENTATIVES



- Professor Ole Petersen, Vice-President for Academia Europaea, Chair
- Professor Rudolf Allemann, Cardiff's Pro Vice-Chancellor, International and Student Recruitment and Head of the College of Physical Sciences and Engineering
- Professor Eva-Maria Feichtner, Bremen's Vice-President International and Diversity
- Professor Peter Halligan, Chief Scientific Adviser for Wales, Welsh Government

This event was a partnership between: **Academia Europaea, University of Bremen, Cardiff University, SAPEA (Science Advice for Policy by European Academies)** and in support of the **Welsh Government's Wales in Germany 2021 initiative.**

The information and opinions expressed in this briefing document do not represent the views and opinions of Academia Europaea and its board of trustees. This document is a summary of ideas discussed at the webinar.



University of Bremen

