



SOCIETYNOW

**COMMUNICATING
COVID-19**

Everyday Life, Digital Capitalism,
and Conspiracy Theories in
Pandemic Times

Christian Fuchs

COMMUNICATING COVID-19

This page intentionally left blank

COMMUNICATING COVID-19

Everyday Life, Digital
Capitalism, and Conspiracy
Theories in Pandemic Times

BY

CHRISTIAN FUCHS

University of Westminster, UK



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

Copyright © 2021 Christian Fuchs
Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited

Reprints and permissions service

Contact: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80117-723-8 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80117-720-7 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80117-722-1 (Epub)



ISOQAR

REGISTERED

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

ISOQAR certified
Management System,
awarded to Emerald
for adherence to
Environmental
standard
ISO 14001:2004.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

<i>List of Tables</i>	vii
<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgement</i>	xi
1. Introduction: Pandemic Times	1
2. Everyday Life and Everyday Communication in Coronavirus Capitalism	17
3. Conspiracy Theories as Ideology	63
4. Bill Gates Conspiracy Theories as Ideology in the Context of the COVID-19 Crisis	91
5. Users' Reactions to COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories on Social Media	145
6. Donald Trump and COVID-19 on Twitter	191
7. Conclusion: Digital Communication in Pandemic Times and Commontopia as the Potential Future of Communication and Society	263
<i>Bibliography</i>	283
<i>Index</i>	309

This page intentionally left blank

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1.	COVID-19 Infection and Death Statistics.	3
Table 2.1.	David Harvey's (2005b) Typology of Social Space.	20
Table 2.2.	Social Space in the Coronavirus Crisis.	21
Table 2.3.	Lefebvre's Distinction Between the Lived and the Living.	22
Table 2.4.	Five Types of the Means of Communication.	25
Table 4.1.	Sampling of Relevant Artefacts.	95
Table 5.1.	Data Sources Used in the Conducted Empirical Research.	149
Table 5.2.	The Coding Scheme Utilised in the Conducted Research.	156
Table 5.3.	descriptive Statistics of the Analysed Dataset.	161
Table 5.4.	Named Enemies in the Use of the Friend/Enemy Scheme; Total Number of Postings Using the Friend Enemy Scheme: N = 452, Listed are all Persons and Groups That in Total had More Than Ten Mentions.	162

Table 5.5.	The Ideological Square Model, Own Visualisation Based on van Dijk (1998, 267).	166
Table 6.1.	Exit Polls in the 2016 and 2020 US Presidential Elections Showing the Share of Voters Who Fall Into a Specific Category.	199
Table 6.2.	Sample of 19 Trump Tweets About COVID-19, Accessed on 19 December 2020, Numbers Are Given in Thousands.	205
Table 6.3.	Share of Weekly Deaths due to COVID-19, Pneumonia and Influenza in the United States, 2020.	242

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1.	Everyday Life and Everyday Communication.	23
Figure 2.2.	Everyday Life and Everyday Communication in the Coronavirus Crisis.	26
Figure 3.1.	Breitbart's Spreading of Rush Limbaugh's COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory on Social Media, https://www.facebook.com/Breitbart/posts/rush-limbaugh-it-looks-like-the-coronavirus-is-being-weaponized-as-yet-another-10164646988865354/ , Accessed on 28 March 2020.	83
Figure 6.1.	A Tweet by Donald Trump Containing Fabricated.	195
Figure 6.2.	Election Fraud Conspiracy Theory Tweets by Donald Trump.	197

This page intentionally left blank

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Earlier versions of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3's Section 3.3 have been previously published as a journal article that has been reproduced and built upon with kind permission of the journal *tripleC* (<http://www.triple-c.at>). Original source: Fuchs, C. (2020). Everyday life and everyday communication in coronavirus capitalism. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, 18(1), 375–399. <https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v18i1.1167>

This page intentionally left blank

INTRODUCTION: PANDEMIC TIMES

1.1 COMMUNICATING COVID-19

This book is a contribution to the analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic on society. It takes a sociological and communication studies approach for analysing the following question: How have society and the ways we communicate changed in the COVID-19 pandemic crisis?

This main question was broken down into a series of sub-questions. There is one chapter in this book dedicated to each sub-question:

- Chapter 2: How have everyday life and everyday communication changed in the COVID-19 crisis? How has capitalism shaped everyday life and everyday communication during this crisis?
- Chapter 3: What is a conspiracy theory? How do conspiracy theories matter in the context of the COVID-19 crisis?

- Chapter 4: How do COVID-19 conspiracy theories about Bill Gates work?
- Chapter 5: How do Internet users react to COVID-19 conspiracy theories spread on social media?
- Chapter 6: How has Donald Trump communicated about COVID-19 on Twitter? How have conspiracy theories influenced his Twitter communication about COVID-19?

The book is organised in the form of seven chapters. The introduction sets out the societal context of the study. Chapters 2–6 address the mentioned questions. Chapter 7 draws conclusions for the future of communication and society.

1.2 SARS-COV-2 AND COVID-19

In 2020 and 2021, the pandemic crisis that emerged from the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) this virus causes shook the world. The virus originated in bats. It was most likely transmitted to humans by the pangolin (Andersen et al. 2020), a subdomain of the mammal clade of Ferae, to which besides the pangolin also carnivorans (e.g. dogs, bears, cats, big cats) belong. The virus first appeared in December 2019 on a food market in Wuhan, the capital of the Chinese province of Hubei, and spread worldwide.

Table 1.1 shows some data about COVID-19 infections and deaths. Until mid-March 2021, one year after the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared the disease a global pandemic, there were more than 120 million infections worldwide with 2.7 million individuals who had died from the disease. This means an average mortality rate of 2.2%.

Table 1.1. COVID-19 Infection and Death Statistics.

Country	Total Cases	Country	Total Deaths	Country	Total Cases per 1 million	Country	Deaths per 1 million	Country	Mortality Rate (%)
US	30,288,789	US	550,537	Czechia	133,077	Czechia	2,229	Yemen	23.5
Brazil	11,693,838	Brazil	284,775	Slovenia	97,431	Belgium	1,942	Mexico	9.0
India	11,473,946	Mexico	195,119	US	91,129	Slovenia	1,899	Sudan	6.7
Russia	4,418,436	India	159,249	Israel	89,608	UK	1,847	Syria	6.7
UK	4,274,579	UK	125,831	Portugal	80,149	Hungary	1,807	Egypt	5.9
France	4,146,609	Italy	103,432	Panama	79,904	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1,737	Ecuador	5.1
Italy	3,281,810	Russia	93,364	Lithuania	76,760	Italy	1,712	China	5.1
Spain	3,206,116	France	91,437	Bahrain	76,395	Bulgaria	1,695	Bolivia	4.6
Turkey	2,930,554	Germany	74,677	Sweden	72,170	US	1,656	Afghanistan	4.4
Germany	2,610,769	Spain	72,793	Belgium	69,936	Portugal	1,643	Liberia	4.2
Global	121,773,470	Global	2,691,030	Global	15,622.4	Global	345.2	Global	2.2

Source: WHO, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>. Accessed on 18 March 2021. Included are only countries that have at least 1 million inhabitants.

Although not as deadly as SARS or MERS, COVID-19's currently guesstimated 2% mortality rate is comparable to the Spanish flu, and like that monster it probably has the ability to infect a majority of the human race unless antiviral and vaccine development quickly come to the rescue

(Davis 2020b, 14)

Countries governed by right-wing leaders such as the United States (Donald Trump), India (Narendra Modi), Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro), Russia (Vladimir Putin), Turkey (Recep Erdoğan) and the United Kingdom (Boris Johnson) are among those with the highest absolute number of COVID-19 cases. Partly these leaders did not take the virus seriously enough, implemented only half-hearted lockdown measures, or underestimated or downplayed the seriousness of the disease. Countries with the highest mortality rates are predominantly developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The underdevelopment of the Global South means not only high levels of poverty but also the lack of basic public services, including a well-developed health-care system. Poor countries and countries where neoliberal governments privatised or cut public support for hospitals or intensive care have been particularly affected by COVID-19.

With a death rate of 2.2% until March 2021, COVID-19 is not comparable to a mild flu. Using global data for the years from 2002 until 2011, Paget et al. (2019) calculated that there was an average of 389,213 annual deaths from seasonal influenza. The World Health Organization (2019) estimates that each year around 1 billion individuals worldwide catch the flu. Based on these data, the average mortality rate of seasonal influenza is 0.04%, which means that as an approximation one can say that COVID-19 is at least 55 times deadlier than seasonal influenza.

The twenty-first century has thus far been a century of multiple crises. At its start, 9/11 in 2001 created a *political crisis* that set off a vicious cycle of terror and war. In 2008, a new *world economic crisis* unfolded that had its origin in the systematic crisis proneness of capitalism and the financialisation of the economy since the 1970s as response to falling profit rates. Many governments bailed out failing banks and corporations, which increased national debt so that they implemented austerity measures, from which workers and the poor suffered. In 2015, a *humanitarian refugee crisis* emerged in Europe that has been the consequence of war, natural disasters and global inequalities. Following the world economic crisis, in a significant number of countries right-wing authoritarian political leaders came to power or strengthened their share of the vote, including Donald Trump in the United States. A *crisis of democracy* unfolded. In 2020, COVID-19 hit the world and created a simultaneous *health crisis, economic crisis, political crisis, cultural crisis, moral crisis and global crisis*.

1.3 HEALTH CRISIS, ECONOMIC CRISIS, POLITICAL CRISIS, CULTURAL CRISIS, MORAL CRISIS

In order to prevent the pandemic getting out of control, many governments introduced lockdowns so that at times most people had to stay at home and all, but absolutely essential shops and institutions had to stay closed. The result was a politically created economic crisis in the context of a major global health crisis. In 2020, the global gross domestic product shrunk according to estimations by 4.4% (data source: IMF World Economic Outlook, October 2020). At the political level, governments had to increase national debt in order to guarantee the survival of humans during lockdown phases. At the political and cultural level, difficult debates emerged

about what sectors of society should remain opened or should be closed during COVID-19 waves. These debates affected realms such as education (schools, nurseries, universities), arts and culture, tourism and gastronomy. In some countries, hospitals' intensive care units reached their limits, which required that society and those taking decisions on medical ethics formulated guidelines in order to decide who should and who should not get an intensive care bed when there is a shortage. Social distancing increased feelings of loneliness and depression. At the level of ideology, COVID-19 conspiracy theory movements emerged that question the existence of the pandemic, the need for countervailing measures (social distancing, wearing masks, lockdown) and spread anti-vaccination propaganda. In turn, the danger emerged that fewer people get vaccinated against COVID-19 and that the health crisis is prolonged.

The United Nations Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (2020) documented the effects of the pandemic on world society with the help of statistics. It summarises some of these effects:

- ‘The pandemic is pushing an additional 71–100 million people into extreme poverty;
- Globally, the first quarter of 2020 saw a loss of the equivalent to 155 million full-time jobs, a number that increased to 400 million in the second quarter, with lower- and middle-income countries hardest hit;
- Simulations suggest a steep and unprecedented decline in the Human Development Index (HDI), undermining six years of progress; [...]
- Even before the pandemic, women did three times more unpaid domestic and care work than men; since the

pandemic, however, data from rapid gender assessment surveys indicate that women in some regions are shouldering the extra burden of an increased workload, particularly in terms of childcare and household chores. [...]

- Global foreign direct investment is now projected to fall by as much as 40% in 2020;
- Global manufacturing output fell by 20% in April 2020 compared to the same period of the previous year, accelerating an already declining trend' (Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities 2020, 3)

1.4 COVID-19 AND CAPITALISM

Capitalism is not the direct cause of SARS-CoV-2. COVID-19 conspiracy theories construct such a direct link by claiming that Bill Gates and pharmaceutical companies have secretly engineered the virus in order to make profits from vaccines. We will analyse such crude economic ideology as part of this book. Such conspiracy theories have been appropriated and advanced by the far-right and the anti-vaccination movement. Capitalism is not the direct cause but a context of COVID-19. Capitalist society has acted as context in several respects, namely:

- Agricultural capitalism;
- The global spread of SARS-COV-2;
- Points of change;
- Governance;
- Ideology;
- Globalisation and de-globalisation;

- Class relations in pandemic times;
- Vaccine capitalism and vaccine nationalism.

1.4.1 Agricultural Capitalism

The global activities of capitalist agribusinesses and their expropriation of cheap land have destroyed natural habitat, have had negative impacts on humans, animal species and plants, and created the foundations of SARS-CoV-2 (Davis 2020b, Foster and Suwandi 2020, Malm 2020, Wallace 2016, 2020). The result has been the loss of biodiversity, which has brought wild animals such as bats into closer contact with humans and has in turn increased the chance of the ‘the contraction of zoonotic diseases from wild to domestic animals to humans’ (Foster and Suwandi 2020). Bats carry many pathogens. Capitalist deforestation and urbanisation has resulted in ‘opening the forests to global circuits of capital’ (Wallace 2016, 327), which has brought bats and other wild animals into closer contact with humans. Eating wild animals has become fashionable among parts of the new bourgeoisie, has turned pangolins, lemurs, bats, racoons, squirrels, rats, badgers, etc., into luxury commodities and has created the job of wild animal hunters as wage labour. The Wuhan ‘wet market’ was one of the places in the world where wild animals were traded and the place where the zoonotic spillover that caused the outbreak of COVID-19 took place.

The Marxist political economist and geographer David Harvey points out the negative effect of capitalism on nature:

Capital modifies the environmental conditions of its own reproduction but does so in a context of unintended consequences (like climate change) and against the background of autonomous and independent evolutionary forces that are perpetually