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The Tipping Point – when, how and why did We start thinking “Pandemically”?

Abstract

*Suspended between theories of manipulation and the public health catastrophe that continues to shake our world, there is a whole range of answers to the questions posed by scientists, doctors, politicians and ordinary folk – when, where, how and why did it all begin? Given the various concepts and ideas on the future **corona** world, it is important to keep asking and (still) avoid simple and mind-numbing answers. The world of media has also reached or surpassed a tipping point – can we even shake the illusion we deserve some “new normal”? Or perhaps the future holds a “new abnormal” world, alongside the “old abnormal”. On the one hand the pandemic has changed our behavioural patterns, and will continue to do so, but it has also changed our way of thinking, reaching conclusions and perceiving the external world and the world within us. On the other hand, are we in part historically regressing through our acceptance of half-dictatorship, lockdowns, immovability, blandness and hiding our smiles? Why and how might the philosophy of the media help with this challenge of views in some new **techno-feudalism**? Will we adopt any new lessons? We must first remember the legendary children’s show **Sesame Street** and its revolutionary insight – you can teach children only if you attract their attention first...*

Key words: pandemic, crisis, media manipulation, tipping point, future world.

A world that follows the rules of epidemics is a very different place from the world we think we live in now.

Malcolm Gladwell

Numerous aspects of our lives, of physical phenomena as well as the psychological, human reactions to new and unexpected circumstances, have been marked by the age of corona, which still has not passed, and in some aspects it practically won't ever disappear. It will continue to change our world alongside all the challenges and (lack of) adaptation stemming from our attempts to control what has befallen us. First however, it should be noted that the issue is not only the reaction and adaptation to an emergency health phenomenon, which is complex also in terms of its medical aspects and attention focused on the World Health Organization and the globally present pandemic. It stretches all the way down to our individual lives, endangered not only by the actual disease, but also by the fear and anxiety due to the possible consequences, progression of the disease and spread of the contagion. The role of media, faithful followers and interpreters of such crises should also be examined.

The global pandemic²¹⁷, faced basically by all countries and regions of the world to a higher or lesser degree, with more or less serious consequences, is actually also a specific global phenomenon within which there is also the non-medical and non-healthcare aspect. This aspect is interlinked with events relating directly to the spreading, stopping or weakening of the disease, and is still stimulated, whether we like it or not, by the specific social and psychological reactions to the disease. It is becoming increasingly evident that the impact of the coronavirus on healthcare processes is also closely linked to the influence of politics (as *the art of the possible* but also as manipulation with public opinion), and interest appetites of elite groups²¹⁸ as well as other social classes facing these new circumstances. Also, it may turn out that these non-medical causes and effects (which do not necessarily have to be unscientific or inexperienced) "work at" strengthening their influence or even use it in order to manage social and media changes or trends.

217 A pandemic is the spread of a disease to large areas, covering different countries, a whole continent, more continents or the whole world. Until today, the term was used for infectious diseases such as the plague, cholera or influenza. Lately, pandemic diseases can also be said to cover AIDS, which across a span of several years covered all continents and almost all countries of the world. Further reading at: <https://medicinski.lzmk.hr/clanak.aspx?id=10508> But in comparison with previous pandemics, the corona pandemic became the "most global" one not only due to its harmful consequences for the human health (mortality rate) but due to the literal participation of the whole world in its progress, as well as the global reach of the media.

218 An elite is a group of people, a minority that holds influence and surveillance over some or all aspects of social life. The idea of a ruling political minority was first developed by Plato, who gave this status to philosophers... Classical theorists of elites, including V. Pareto, G. Mosca and R. Michels, believe that societies are always divided into the ruling, managing elite and an underprivileged mass. An elite is made up from individuals who have reached the highest level in their specific areas... <https://enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?ID=17725> However, in terms of corona, an elite can also be a group that believes itself to be "chosen and privileged", which enables it to decide in the name of everyone (and in their absence) on the necessary limitations, not only in terms of healthcare, but in all other aspects as well...

We therefore aim to explain the significance of “new” events precisely through the discussion of the extent to which the pandemic and its consequences and circumstances have impacted opinion, everyday politics, corporate economy, practical sociology and philosophy... This is specifically important in terms of media, freedom of media and mass media actions. It means accepting the simultaneous strengthening of previously hidden or at least socially less acceptable instances of curtailing or limiting freedom, whether in terms of space, time or democratic and civil rights. Unfortunately this is a matter of interdependence and feedback in which effects and consequences on health are increased or changed precisely by politics, interests and interest groups, lobbyist and corporate activities, influenced by the hunger for profit, as well as the factors of human depression, helplessness and inactivity.

The coronavirus and its effects on global society, regional perspectives as well as individual affinities and possibilities – all of which can collectively be termed *the future of social changes* – in the first months of 2021 faces new energies, changes and reversals. It is becoming increasingly clear that – partly due to the changing climate in parts of the world where winter is coming to an end, but also due to the wider use of vaccines – that the severity and death toll of the virus will gradually decrease. The problem will be “different” from the healthcare point of view, as well as from the previously mentioned non-medical aspect, and we should ask ourselves whether we are ready for change and a return to the “old state of affairs” under circumstances in which activities of political institutions will continue to change, as will our psychological reaction to the existing crisis. Actors, passive and active throughout the crisis, transform and seek new positions in which to strengthen their power of surveillance and the “never-ending dream” – achieving the greatest possible amount of control over our actions, motivations, wants and driving forces of our minds.

In order to address this issue, one needs to go back chronologically, thematically and purposefully to the moment when the first twist slapped us in the face – when we were suddenly yanked out of what we considered to be the old normal into some new circumstances. The question remains whether the previous state of affairs was either old or normal. At the beginning, these new circumstances did not seem like possible or logical causes of some global turning point affecting regions and territories. Much has already been written, analysed and discussed on the coronavirus, but here we aim to examine those moments, or rather the time when we started thinking pandemically. When, how and why did we agree to changes we have “spun” to such an extent that we have become very active participants in further changes, which we at the same time regarded as something unknown, unexpected or alien?²¹⁹ Changes we have often refused to name as such.

219 In some Tibetan temples passersby can roll large prayer wheels containing old inscriptions, and they keep spinning smoothly and continuously, never-ending. Each passerby and visitor tries to spin them again (as fast as they can go)... the symbolism of transience and one’s own participation in what is now and what is to come i.e. leaving the responsibility to one’s heirs and people (strangers) to continue the karmic journey. The difference between these wheels and a situation in which we keep “spinning” the same thoughts and fears about corona, is perhaps in the fact that in Buddhism, what you leave behind needs to be filled with warmth, joy and positive thoughts for the ones who will follow – despite the transience and the possibility of negative outcomes...

We should also clearly and purposefully focus our efforts on the (mass) media sphere and (mass) media dimensions²²⁰ of this global event that in a short time managed to instil deep changes in almost every aspect of our lives and activities. Comparisons with other historical periods and circumstances when different epidemics spread dangerous diseases through old civilizations, the medieval and modern era, may bring a range of deeper insights and conclusions, or even help us in psychosocial coping with what we are faced with. But it is certain that no epidemic, regardless of its severity or mortality rate, has ever taken place with such a presence and impact of the media, ranging from print to electronic media, especially the Internet.

Pandemic or infodemic – the chicken or the egg of the media?

It can be stated as fact that the media themselves were one of the main actors in the pandemic, impacting the situation in both positive and negative ways, because the pandemic event was actually more global than ever or anywhere in history. The use of the neologism *infodemic* is thoroughly justified if we take into account that the media as a whole and in individual instances, served as the main instigator of the whole atmosphere due to their type and function. Not only in terms of providing information on the causes and effects of the pandemic, but because they also served as the goal and means of a complete reversal towards a more unsettled, frightened, and in a way, sicker society. Of course, here we do not discuss the goals of the medical profession or efforts and hard work by healthcare workers and those who truly care about fighting for the good health and lives of individuals.

The issue in fact is the interference and efforts to hasten the transformation of epidemiological circumstances into pandemical ways of thinking which would instrumentalize the development of events, this time not only in the medical sense, but also in terms of changes in social circumstances, environment and psychological aspects. These would then finally bring about an economical struggle and pause in economic activities and the current dynamic within global, regional and national frameworks. These are no conspiracy theories which could be discussed in a whole separate paper, but rather these are emerging structures formed from elements of a *post-truth* society and community, from the *fake news* of weapons and tools used by the media, and the use of the current state of affairs for crudely and strictly political goals and purposes.

The pandemic can and should be analysed as an infodemic from the perspective of the philosophy of the media, when examining the general and specific current role and effect of the media and its mediation in human relationships. This also includes the impact on the exchange of everyday and

220 It should be noted that we consider the media in general through the impact of mass media, the largest and most prominent (global and local) keepers and distributors of information, and through the impact and work of social networks (Facebook, Twitter... as well as forums and the activity of haters, trolls and average users). In the following ideas and analysis, *mass media* are defined through the term and phenomena of the *media* as the totality of what is realized and interpreted by the media during the pandemic, as it creates and gains infodemic characteristics of pandemical thinking.

mental data of every conscious human being from the outside in and vice-a-versa. The lessons and messages we receive in this fashion can surely help as part of the analysis and evaluation in this age that we can rightly define as a moment in which the already known idea of the media constructing reality instead of truthfully mirroring it is further developed and confirmed. The media aims to represent reality with as much fuzziness and manipulation as possible, thus ceasing to serve as correctives in line with traditional journalistic and professional values. Instead they obscure reality and become the ones who justify a newly constructed reality that serves their own interests or rather, the interests and goals of the quasi-elite.

If we are to achieve a wide-ranging explanation of the context in which this medical phenomenon appears, alongside the causes and consequences of the problems affecting (mass) media in the local and global sense, we should not merely focus on the beginning of the epidemic or the official proclamation of a pandemic. We must examine the changes in reporting styles and interpretation in the media, as well as the consequences on public opinion and the general public in the global sense, and on other levels, all the way down to the mentality of the individual.

It is therefore first necessary to examine the so-called tipping point, the (spatial and temporal) watershed that changed our established way of thinking not just as readers, listeners or viewers, but also as critically analytical individuals that could be said to represent a healthy society and a healthy general public.

Let us begin with the idea by Malcolm Gladwell who posited in a sociological sense that “the best way to understand the emergence of fashion trends, the ebb and flow of crime waves, or, for that matter, the transformation of unknown books into bestsellers, or the rise of teenage smoking, or the phenomena of word of mouth, or any number of other mysterious changes that mark everyday life is **to think of them as epidemics**” (text bolded by N.V.)²²¹ Gladwell begins his extensive research with the notion that ideas, products, messages and behaviours also have their “medical” characteristics – they are activated and begun, spread and developed as infectious diseases.

Gladwell lists three main rules of an epidemic (or in the case of corona, a pandemic) – the first one is *contagiousness* with clearly noticeable patterns of infectious behaviour in psycho-sociological phenomena like the ones in infectious disease. The second rule relates to the fact that *little causes can have big effects*, and third, that *change happens not gradually but at one dramatic moment*. It is similar to the principle of how for instance, chickenpox spreads through a classroom or how the flu returns every winter.

Gladwell sees this third principle as the most important one – the idea that epidemics start or end in one dramatic moment we may or may not notice, but after which things and circumstances are quite different and therefore require different types of behaviour and solutions. He notes that it is this principle “that makes sense of the first two and that permits the greatest insight into why modern

²²¹ Malcolm Gladwell, *Točka preokreta. Kako male stvari mogu dovesti do velikih promjena*, Jesenski i Turk, Zagreb 2011, p. 10. (Tipping Point, Hachette Book Group, New York 2002);

change happens the way it does. The name given to that one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all at once is the Tipping Point.”²²²

Gladwell translates sociological phenomena ranging from fashion trends to crime rates, into healthcare or biological aspects in order to deepen the sociological and/or psychological meaning regarding human society. For example, contagiousness is for him a general rule which, like epidemiological causes and characteristics may turn into a contagion of laughter, shopping for clothes or surprising characteristics of anything in our environment. Little changes can truly lead to big results, for example, the speaker’s motivation or the tireless presentation of one’s own example. Such is the possibility of a sudden and drastic change after relatively expected gradual advent of smaller oscillations, whether in the development of illnesses or trends – the sudden moving of homeowners from areas controlled by criminal groups for example, or sudden migrations or the spread of new technologies.

Such phenomena of course also have their dialectical cause and interpretation, not just as sociological or epidemiological changes. Our aim is to learn if and how it is possible to examine a “reversed” process – can contagiousness, small changes as precursors to big results and sudden surprising changes lead to a turning point in the current global state of affairs? Applying this idea onto our situation, we come to the conclusion that these three rules are currently true, as the world of the coronavirus pandemic has led to what we are now experiencing in the media and psychosocial sphere – the phenomenon of pandemical thinking. This also means a lack of critical thinking, preponderance of fear and disbelief, and pandemical behaviour we have been led to, or which has partly been imposed on us.

One thing can be ascertained with some ease – the Covid-19 pandemic, also known as the coronavirus pandemic, was first identified as a new respiratory disease Covid-19 (Corona Virus Disease 2019). The condition first appeared in late December 2019 in the city of Wuhan (11 million inhabitants) in the Hubei province in China. In January 2020 it grew into an epidemic in China, and then spread to numerous other countries and reached all continents. It was sparked by the previously unknown coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. In order to stop the spread of the disease in countries with no efficient healthcare systems, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an international state of emergency on 30 January 2020.²²³

²²² Ibid, p. 11.

²²³ https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pandemija_COVID-19 Here we won’t discuss fake news and politicized comments on how “China deliberately (!) spread the virus”. It has been shown that China, and other countries such as New Zealand or South Korea, fought coronavirus decisively, not only in the medical sense, but owing to the culture of the population and their following of prescribed measures. In this way it managed to suppress the coronavirus, much to the chagrin of Western “mainstream media” of Trump’s era, and became an actual role model for procedures taken by the government as well as the public and population. At the moment of writing this text – January 2021, the coronavirus continues to be an extensive problem mainly in the so-called Western world, while countries in Asia and Africa, and their experience with the coronavirus are no longer the focus of Western mass media (on purpose?)...

As early as 9 February 2020, the number of registered fatalities surpassed the total number of deaths during the SARS virus pandemic in 2002/2003. The speed and dramatic extent of the epidemic were also evidenced by the WHO report from 26 February 2020, the first instance when a greater number of people were infected outside of China than within its borders. Furthermore, starting from 28 February 2020, WHO analyses and reports assessed the risk as “very high” on the global scale, in comparison to the previous estimation of a “high” risk. Finally, on 11 March 2020 the WHO officially identified the epidemic as a pandemic, making it the first pandemic after the one of swine flu, in 2009.

In Croatia, the first case was confirmed on 25 February 2020. This was a 26-year-old who visited Milan in the period between 19 and 21 February (Italy was among the countries with a sudden rise in the number of those infected). After he tested positive, he was hospitalized in the University Hospital for Infectious Diseases Dr. Fran Mihaljević in Zagreb. Two new cases were confirmed on 26 February, the twin brother of the first patient and one Croatian who had been working in Parma. After 29 February, Croatia had a total of seven confirmed cases, and then the number of those infected doubled in just 10 days. On Wednesday, 11 March 2020, the Minister of Healthcare in Croatia, Vili Beroš issued the *Decision on declaring the epidemic of the disease Covid-19 caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus* on the whole territory of the Republic of Croatia, and the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on the same day.²²⁴

Although it may not appear so at first, analysing the statistics and recorded cases is somewhat easier than to examine, determine and assess the moments or period in which we “started” thinking and acting first “epidemically” and then also “pandemically”. In part this is due to the fact that for a while, numerous elements were interpreted in two different ways – one part of the general public did not perceive the coronavirus as something dangerous, and some were quick to disregard published facts. All of this was aided by the often conflicting views by experts, as well as all kinds of self-proclaimed experts, and by new legions of haters and trolls, alarming and confusing the public, as could be expected in this world and age of image and superficiality.

Social networks, forums and anonymous paid or volunteering instigators of fear and anxiety, unfortunately became the centre of spreading infodemic aspects, which proved to be no less dangerous than the pandemic ones. This included the obscuring of actual events, casting doubt on science and medicine, as well as common conspiracy theories which were once again resurrected.

Of course one should always note that conspiracy theories are not to be mixed with the usual logic of capital and megacorporations, of governments and elites that favour manipulation, and for whom

²²⁴ During 2020 the number of newly infected people in Croatia increased in hundreds and thousands, by the end of the year reaching up to four thousand newly infected a day and dozens of deaths. The beginning of 2021 brought lower numbers, but this time measures weren't relaxed.

<https://zdravstvo.gov.hr/userdocsimages/2020%20coronavirus/odluka%20o%20proglac%5%a0enju%20epidemi-je%20bolesti%20covid-19.pdf>

https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pandemija_koronavirusa_u_Hrvatskoj_2020.#Dolazak_i_%C5%A1irenje_koronavirusa_u_Hrvatskoj

the foundation of economy, management and conquering structure is in imposing force and often absurd rules that the masses and most of the general public do not understand. Although radical conspiracy theories (aliens and lizard men...) and critiques of society and media often start from similar (partial) information, the relevance and conclusions by conspiracy theorists (even the most persuasive ones) compared to well-intentioned social critics are quite different in their nature and scientific methods.

Attempts to merge specific manipulation techniques, instances of exaggeration, generalization and averting attention by established elites and ruling classes, with absurd theses about the perennial “external” influences on the helpless and innocent public, prove to be fertile ground for the further “contagion” with fear and anxiety. Problems do not necessarily arrive from the outside and from other countries, regions, ideologies and religions, as members of these quasi-elites would have us believe. The general public and the elective body are not always innocent either, as they very often elect the same options or do not even participate in the elections, thus passively voting for the next or same “elite”. The issue of helpless, atomized individuals continues to be one among the more or less hidden foundations for the ruling and privileged classes. This is the essence of their political and economic power, and often the psychosocial power as well.

Ivan Krastev, an intellectual and expert on Eastern European studies and modern Europe, has an interesting view on circumstances surrounding the coronavirus. In a particularly well executed study of the coronavirus pandemic, he emphasizes the changes in the pandemic world which we did not see coming, although there were some warning signs. The National Intelligence Council predicted as early as 2004 that it is “only a matter of time before a new pandemic appears, just like the influenza virus which killed millions people worldwide during the 1918 – 1919 pandemic”. Such an event, the report continues, might “stop world travel and trade during a longer period of time and stimulate world governments to spend huge amounts of resources on the struggling healthcare system”.²²⁵ Furthermore, Krastev notes that in a TED talk²²⁶ from 2015, Bill Gates predicted and announced a global epidemic of a highly contagious virus, in addition to warning that the world and various countries are not prepared enough to face it. Even Hollywood had its continuous “warnings” through horror movies on global deadly contagions.²²⁷

225 Ivan Krastev, *Pandemija nostalgije. Kako koronavirus mijenja Europu* (The Nostalgia Pandemic: How the Coronavirus is Changing Europe), TIMpress, Zagreb 2020, p. 9.

226 TED, an abbreviation of Technology, Entertainment, Design, was established in 1984 and organizes motivational talks on specific topics. The length of the talks ranges from 3 to 18 minutes, and speakers include various notable individuals, experts from across the world, famous or important for their discoveries or successes in various areas such as education, business, science, technology and creativity. Available at: www.ted.com

227 Here we should note that neither Krastev nor the author of the current paper, take into account any conspiracy theories that “reveal” planning and conspiring to release a contagious virus from a laboratory, nor do they link Bill Gates with plans for the mass chipping of humans or radiation of 5G technology. However, such ideas were most often used, not only by members of obscure organizations and regular trolls and haters scouring social networks, but also by journalists and the media in general, especially some news websites whose influence increased during corona and surpassed the impact of print media. The influence was mainly due to casting doubt and worry, in short, the manufacture of anxiety and fear of technology, which then increased the number of “clicks” on these webpages. We emphasize the possible warning signs before the so-called tipping point itself, which have not been heard or understood well enough, which

The crisis as a chance or time wasted?

The pandemic of thinking (about corona) i.e., thinking about the pandemic may be said to have begun with the moment when the disease was officially declared a pandemic. This however is not entirely true, since it was still often not clear in the public or the media, what was actually happening, even when the number of those infected began to rise significantly. It could be said that a healthcare crisis was beginning, while the more overwhelming crisis – mental and social, local and global – appeared somewhat later. This included the already mentioned absurdity that during this period the general public started dividing into groups – “apologists” of the pandemic, often named as scared servants to the global conspiracy theory, and the opposing side, often seen as irresponsible and unreasonable. The media followed its superficial and sensationalist instincts, pitting one group against the other, while increasingly disregarding the “third” category of moderate readers, listeners, viewers and online news readers, actual experts, scientists, doctors and those who were interested in solutions instead of bouncing off problems in the media.

Unfortunately, ever since the first reports and comments, the pandemic also became an infodemic, in its multitude of contagious texts, newspaper articles and approaches following the goals and styles of a post-truth society. The basic tenet here is that truth is not as important as inciting emotions and likes through things like corona deaths or statements that need to carry the punch of great tension and anxiety. This then of course increases the likelihood of clicks and frantic searches for *opinions-we-approve-of* and decreases the need for verified and true facts on the extent and consequences of the disease.

The American sociologist C. Wright Mills already warned of the fact that “wielded power becomes manipulation” and such methods and techniques later developed precisely in the wake of disasters such as wars or mass starvation. They are also present in the definition and spread of “deadly democracy” and forced freedom – an oxymoron preferred in particular by Western governments, participants and instigators of warfare and economic operations in the Third World. This is the so-called soft control in which people and the public are smothered within the rules of the system instead of being directly eliminated – “in a modern society, coercion has been monopolized by the democratic state, and is rarely necessary as a continuous measure, but those in power often use it in hidden ways.”²²⁸

Such involvement by the government in the turn of events during the corona crisis, depending on the character of its rule and actual level of democracy, was the determining factor in the gradual move from pandemic events to pandemic thinking in the community, at the local and global level. Regardless of their autocratic or democratic characteristics, the already corroded democratic rule in a large number of countries, ranging from the U.S. to Europe and Asia, acquired new holes and

was also the case with other dramatic and sudden changes in history, not only related to medicine.

228 Further reading in: Slobodan Reljić, *Kriza medija ili mediji krize* (Crisis of the Media or the Media of the Crisis), Službeni glasnik, Belgrade 2013, p. 112.

patches, as the ruling class, governments in general and the so-called elite understood how the corona pandemic as an emergency situation could be used for increasing control.

As opposed to historical attempts to implement something similar, the control of the pandemic provided a reasonable and justified goal, which could also be aided by technology in numerous ways and in planetary proportions. Mass media as modern technological tools are now liberated from the traditional requirement of being a corrective and mirror to society that cooperates with the public in order to strengthen its critical faculties and intelligence. By their nature being alienated things and aspects, mass media now enter into pacts with the government. They do not do this openly, of course, but gradually, in the mere *failure to do something* and the disregard for the standard and accepted rules of reporting and sharing information.

Of course we must not overgeneralize, as there is no clear distinction between black and white in terms of media, even though some wish there would be. Those months when the power of the coronavirus weakened, revealed how some media returned to their original principles and (again) started exploring and exposing the levels of corruption, injustice, poverty or economic and military domination. For some luckily and for others unfortunately, the coronavirus spread not only through physical space, but also in the media. The wish to increase the extent of political power was stronger first for governments, and indirectly for some elite groups, so they continued to exploit the situation. However big or small, totalitarianism is a life form that grows and learns quickly, aided by the fresh water provided by the media.

As rightly noted by Sead Alić, “the crisis makes it impossible to infinitely perpetuate the system of flagrant reiteration of untruths as a form of ingraining the preferred way of thinking into the heads of viewers as potential citizens. Once the resources run out, needed for paychecks, pensions, payment of accrued interest etc., then the flickering smiles on the screen, the game of promises, false security and pre-emptive attacks – lose their footing.”²²⁹ However, the weakening of the disease and the (apparent?) return of citizens to their half-forgotten circumstances, as well as the relaxing or tightening of measures, can make media users go slightly crazy. Within the superficial fight and worry for human plight and the already mentioned return to “how it was”, the media actually offer increased anxiety and fear, fuzziness and distraction. These are individuals and actions that did not meet expectations during the emergency situation, or cannot satisfy them anymore, but are kept in place by the institutions and governments because – any kind of power tastes just as sweet.

In the media sense, every crisis, including the pandemic, therefore strives to offer interpretations that are either optimistic or pessimistic, depending on which emotions are to be invoked in those who click and pay for the advertisements. However, the only correct interpretation would be to show things in their reality! “Every crisis is primarily caused by the need to redistribute media space among the political, economic, religious and cultural actors/agents/groups/classes in society. Just

229 Alić, Sead, *Masmediji zatvori bez zidova. Tekstovi filozofije medija* (Mass Media – A Prison without Walls: Essays in the Philosophy of the Media), Centre for Media Philosophy and Research, Zagreb 2012, p. 66.

as a nation can be led to war owing to the media, it cannot be led out of the war without them. The crisis helps us understand the media. Understanding the media is the beginning of a new era.”²³⁰

Slobodan Reljić is openly critical of certain media, and emphasized even before the appearance of the coronavirus that in some media, journalism is in fact “wholesale trade in poison”. Such an endeavour constructs the public into a mass, preferably an uncritical one and susceptible to excessive emotional outbursts which in a vicious circle reproduces mass without solidarity. A critically aware public should contain solidarity at its core and in the way it acts.

However, the increasing influence of media on the lives of individuals and society as a whole seems to be taking place in a paradoxical back-and-forth direction. At the same time there is increasingly a lack of trust among the general public and the masses in the veracity of media truths, as well as the growing level of mistrust, contempt and even hatred among the public and online forum commenters towards the media (not necessarily only among the haters). The sentiment of the media towards its consumers is sometimes similar. However, in the end all these negative thoughts and (media) hatred constitute the poison we all drink, certain that someone else will be the one poisoned.

The audience gives different amounts of attention to different news. According to one research by Doris Graber within the PEW Research Centre²³¹ carried out between 1986 and 2003, the most prominent stories were the ones on endangering the safety of media users or violating social norms. “Fear-arousing situations attract the largest audiences... These are reactions to events that threaten survival, and these reactions mobilize cognitive resources inducing attention... News (particularly images) can operate as sources of stimuli equivalent to lived experience. Hatred, anxiety, fear, and high elation are particularly stimulating and are also retained in long-term memory.”²³²

The silent (voluntary) death of media and journalism

What then is the biggest – and not always recognized – (harmful) role of media among centres of power, different forms of manipulation, faster technological and social communication, in terms of the relationship between power and media? “Politics is the process of allocation of power in the institutions of the state... power relationships are largely based on the shaping of the human mind by the construction of meaning through image-making... ideas are images (visual or not) in our brain. For society at large, as distinct from a given individual, image-making is played out in the realm of socialized communication. In contemporary society, everywhere in the world, the media are the decisive means of communication.”²³³

230 Ibid, p. 68.

231 PEW (*Pew Research Center*) – independent research centre based in Washington. <https://www.pewresearch.org/>

232 Manuel Castells, *Moć komunikacija*, Multimedia Clio-RTS, Belgrade 2014, p. 195; (Communication Power, Oxford University Press Inc., New York 2009, p. 156)

233 Ibid, p. 234 (2009: p. 193).

Castells sees the overall media system as a system and set of communication organizations and technologies that encourage individuals' own decisions or what they believe are their own decisions. It adapts to close-knit social groups, famous role models (whatever they may be) and strengthens or weakens communication in a society, which proves to be extremely important during pandemic times. In the context of the coronavirus, media policy is not only the fight for their users or for survival – a fight in which print and even electronic media are falling behind social networks. In the symbiosis between government and media which exists during pandemical thinking – the generally accepted way of thinking – the meaning of media is gradually transformed into managing media politics within the media, while politics as an art of the possible primarily becomes media policy.

A pandemic way of thinking makes objects, individuals and groups susceptible to focusing on mere numbers of those newly infected, sick, hospitalized, dead, without really understanding the meaning of these categories. At the same time numbers of those who have recovered are barely mentioned, even though this should be one of the ways to give some hope to the population. But is that really necessary at all? Maybe it would decrease anxiety and stimulate solidarity and activism, which are among the greatest dangers for the calculated union between the media and pure politics.

Pandemical thinking also includes the belief that there is no need for messages, organizations and leaders not closely related to the coronavirus, or rather its sensationalist and spectacular aspects, to even be present in the media. Thus it is impossible for them to gain any significance or permanence in the mind of the public. "The fact that politics is essentially played out in the media does not mean that other factors (for example, grassroots activism or fraud) are not significant in deciding the outcome of political contests. Neither does it imply that the media are the power-holders. They are not the Fourth Estate. They are much more important: they are the space of power-making. The media constitute the space where power relationships are decided between competing political and social actors."²³⁴

Here however we must depart from a mere criticism of the media during the corona crisis – among the institutions, groups, social classes and decisions, who would then survive the criticism of all those descriptions, explanations, comments and interpretations of measures and requests by the government and healthcare professionals? Or who would speak truthfully of their own mistakes, information traps, personal interpretations, ego-trips induced by haters and trolls, everyday wise guys and conscious individuals.

In this case who would "cast the first stone at the media who have received and taken on a difficult task – to report on the situation with the virus, the state of different countries and nations, the global situation, internal affairs, foreign threats, global, regional and local changes happening every hour of the day? They are analysing global changes which are practically without precedence in modern history (not taking into account epidemics like ebola or the plague) down to individual personal

234 Ibid, p. 235. (2009: p. 194).

behaviours and, first and foremost, the relation to Oneself and to Others in times of overarching emergencies like wars or epi/pan/demics.”²³⁵

Criticism of the media, a Sisyphean task of trying to separate the roles and goals of so-called serious journalism and media on the one hand and social networks on the other during times of corona, should not in the end be a fruitless task. We must remember that journalism as a whole began to die out many years before the coronavirus appeared, after suffering several difficult illnesses threatening the profession. It was already losing its breath when the coronavirus came along as a momentary relief at a time when the media patient lay in its bed. Leo Rafolt also comments on this situation, noting that “the world is shaped today on the slopes of information, beyond the binarism of truth and lies, and so tries to take over what we once called the news. In late winter and early spring of 2020, the world was ravaged by one such news item, in the form of information. They named it corona, then Covid-19, and it was simply a virus, one of many modulations existing on the border between living and nonliving, biology and chemistry. The information itself soon became a virus. The virus became information.”²³⁶

In his book, Rafolt identifies moments and phenomena that actually pull members of masses or elites away from reality, mainly away from the comforting world in which everyone had to know their place. Hashtags, numbers of those infected and dead, limited travels, social distancing as the bogeyman of the new era, these have spread like a virus through Europe and other parts of the globe. Alain Badiou painted the age of corona in even harsher and direct terms, probably due to his intellectual experience and images lived through, saying that “one will need to show publicly and dauntlessly that so-called ‘social media’ have once again demonstrated that they are above all – besides their role in fattening the pockets of billionaires – a place for the propagation of the mental paralysis of braggarts, uncontrolled rumours, the discovery of antediluvian ‘novelties’, or even fascistic obscurantism”.²³⁷

Velimir Šonje is another critic who analysed the situation when Croatia was firmly in the grips of the corona crisis. A scientist and economist, he meticulously analyses the circumstances, the psychosis and collective social reaction. This includes facts²³⁸ which will luckily remain recorded in his exhaustive research on the so-called five riders of the apocalypse, that is, the five bad ideas that were “catapulted to the surface of society” due to the spread of fear about the coronavirus.

235 Nenad Vertovšek, *Drveno željezo medija* (The Wooden Iron of the Media), Medijska kultura, Nikšić 2020, p. 157.

236 Leo Rafolt, *Virus in fabula*, Meandarmedia, Zagreb 2020, p.11.

237 Alain Badiou, *On the Epidemic Situation*, Verso, 23 March 2020 – cited in L.Rafolt, *Virus in fabula*, p. 11. (<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4608-on-the-epidemic-situation>).

238 One needs only keep in mind that Vili Beroš, the Minister of Health, who was at one moment celebrated as a hero by the media, said in conversation with *Sobodna Dalmacija* on 26 February 2020 that corona was a “disease similar to the common flu”. This happened only two days before the WHO declared a “high level of risk”, not even two weeks before corona was recognized as a global pandemic... Velimir Šonje, *Korona ekonomika* (Corona Economics), Arhiv-aanalitika, 2020, p. 10.

He believes that bad ideas²³⁹ include “helicopter money” (giving money to citizens), then the fact that the European Union is compromised, and the striving for self-sufficiency in which global capitalism is replaced by national economy frameworks. There is also the idea of a state-mother as reaffirming state power and intervention and finally the inescapable suspension of democracy and civil rights. Šonje’s point of view is that of an expert economist who warns about the disregarded effects of the pandemic on the economy, which provides a starting point for the five negative actions and ideas. These might seem like a gentle step or two backwards, from liberal capitalism to medieval and feudal “sanctuaries” of body, spirit and soul.

Šonje notes that some experts and journalists in the Croatian media claimed that any questioning of the official doctrine of the Government and Crisis Headquarters on the corona situation, also included the possibility that “the young and healthy, and the entrepreneurs sacrifice the old and infirm, for profit and to stimulate the economy...”²⁴⁰ This of course wasn’t true, but could be used by the media alongside similar statements for inflating someone’s alleged Nazi-sociological or fascist tendencies towards methods of eliminating the older population. This simultaneously turns the attention away from mistakes made by the Government and its politically allegiant Crisis Headquarters in their inability to introduce and maintain protection measures. Certain sins and dilemmas of the government in dealing with the crisis may be understood and justified, but the refusal to admit to the mistakes and improve or change the measures, brought on new confusion and gradually decreasing trust of the public in the decisions and activities by the government and the Crisis Headquarters.

A particularly professional and humane comment by the CNN journalist Fareed Zakaria can be used as an example for analysis and interpretation on why and when people started to think pandemically alongside their thinking about the pandemic. This change additionally blocked the implementation of measures in global terms and in individual countries, depending on the importance given to the main goal – the health of citizens irrespective of interference by the political elite striving to keep its privileges and customs. Depending on the cooperation by some media (mostly social networks and online news services) the government accused “the others” of its own selfish interests, those apparently not following the proscribed measures thus sabotaging all efforts by the healthcare system and good intentions of the government and the elite. This again could be used for excuses that the coronavirus cannot be controlled and new and more strict measures should be imposed, while part of the privileged classes and those aspiring to be like them again broke the rules. This happened again and again.

Zakaria’s work *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World* offers a range of interesting insights. He reveals good medical knowledge, but also the ability to include additional effects in his thinking, such as populism, limitations on travel and freedom of movement for people, goods and services,

239 V. Šonje, *Korona ekonomika*, p. 103.

240 Ibid, p. 12.

or the positive and negative sides of digital inventions during the challenges posed by corona. Zakaria notes that some topics such as equality, have been forgotten, and due to global lockdowns and breakdown of economies, this leads to the neglect of increasing global inequality and poverty. There is also a lack of empathy and real compassion for those most hit by the crisis, regardless of their continent, region, gender, age or state of health and health standard.

The people should listen to the experts – and the experts should listen to the people – Fareed Zakaria emphasizes, warning that numerous politicians and statesmen did not listen to the experts. Their approach was hypocritical and populist, as they claimed the experts can be calmly ignored.²⁴¹ This of course includes instances where the experts themselves, occupying the heights of their Mount Olympus, failed to listen to *vox populi* (already quite a *normal* approach taken by politicians) i.e. check up on their own statements, actions and theories in the feedback of everyday life and troubles of common folk.

Lessons and messages from the past, for the future

This seems strange and absurd, since it would appear that at the beginning of 2021, after one year has passed since the first victims of the coronavirus, there are no hopes for the end, or the weakening of the pandemic and its consequences. At the same time this does not include the significant part of the world population living outside of Europe, and North and South America. Experiences from history can prove quite useful when we analyse the overarching consequences and changes that happened in a similar way, first medically and then according to rules we noted in the writings of Malcolm Gladwell.

For example, the Spanish flu in fact does not provide us with a good comparison since this was a misfortune that literally wiped out parts of the already suffering humanity, especially in Europe, right on the heels of the catastrophe of the Great/First World War. Since this could surely be a theme for a separate paper, here we limit the similarities to the contagiousness and drastic changes in the population, without the factor of a global audience like the one that witnessed the birth of corona.

The historian Nikola Anušić very precisely and meticulously analyses the Spanish flu pandemic in northern Croatia, from demographic to close statistical indicators of the situation and its

²⁴¹ Zakaria, Fareed, *Deset lekcija za svijet poslje pandemije* (Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World), Fraktura, Zagreb 2020, p. 85. Zakaria notes that during his nomination at the 2016 election, Donald Trump claimed he talks “most with himself because he is very smart”, and later explained how he does not rely on experts because “experts are terrible people”. At the same time, Michael Grove, a British politician and advocate for Brexit, was asked to list economists who agree with his view that leaving the European Union would be good for business. He answered that “people in this country are sick of experts”... Trump and similar highly positioned politicians like the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson or Jairo Bolsanaro, President of Brazil and a plethora of others, expressed their contempt for expertise before the corona crisis as well, but their “stumbling” and “imposed populism” in manipulating the people in the name of that same people, has proved to be particularly fatal for hundreds of thousands of people during the corona crisis.

consequences. As an introduction to the analysis of events in northern Croatia, an area that was hit in particular like the poorer parts of Europe, he talks about the new variant of the influenza A virus, of a mysterious origin, that spread over the world in three pandemic waves, infecting over half a billion people and killing 50 to 100 million across the world. “No pestilence, war or any period of hunger in human history has ever before killed such a great number of people in such a short period of time. The great Spanish flu pandemic in 1918 was the strongest global demographic earthquake the world had ever experienced.”²⁴²

We emphasize the apparently absurd circumstances, as Anušić notes, that such a great and dramatic watershed for a large proportion of humanity, was later almost forgotten?! The scientific and historiographic interest for the greatest pandemic in history soon almost disappeared and overviews of world history rarely mentioned the Spanish flu pandemic, while some studies on World War I don't even mention it. Anušić is surprised by “its swift and total disappearance from the collective memory of humanity. As noted by R. Collier, there are no songs, legends or works of art inspired by the great pandemic in the cultural history of the world and references to the Spanish flu in world literature, even among the famous contemporaries of the pandemic, are so slight they don't deserve to even be mentioned... we might say that today people on average know more on the Black Death of the 14th century than the Spanish flu at the end of World War I.”²⁴³ In the period between the 1957/58 Asian flu pandemic and the 1968/69 Hong Kong flu pandemic there was some increasing interest in studying the Spanish flu.²⁴⁴

Krastev also discusses this topic, noting that the Spanish flu might have killed more people than the First and Second World War in total – about 67 million people, as opposed to the approximation that the “Spaniard” killed between 50 and 100 million (according to different sources). Laura Spinney points out that most answers to the question on the greatest misery of the 20th century fail to mention the Spanish flu.²⁴⁵ Krastev notes that most scientists/historians have forgotten about this epidemic. In 2017, WorldCat, the largest catalogue of books in the world, listed about 80 thousand books (in over forty languages), of which only 400 (four hundred) were on the Spanish flu, in only five languages. The question is – “why do we remember wars and revolutions, and forget about

242 Nikola Anušić, *U sjeni velikog rata. Pandemija španjolske gripe 1918.-1919. u sjevernoj Hrvatskoj* (In the Shadow of the Great War. The Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1918-1919 in Northern Croatia), Srednja Europa, Zagreb 2015, p. 1.

243 Ibid, p.2.

244 The work of the doctors Jeremić Rista and Jorja Tadić “*Prilozi za istoriju zdravstvene kulture starog Dubrovnika*” (Towards a History of the Health Culture in Old Dubrovnik) provide us with an interesting confirmation that after the Spanish flu epidemic calmed down, there is a lack of historical data, i.e. there are holes in the collective written memory, unlike for example, the data on the 14th century plague. The valuable historical heritage of Dubrovnik is a source of knowledge on numerous epidemics ranging back to 871, but it was in the 14th century that consequences of up to ten epidemics and the appearance of the plague are described in more detail. The archive also describes in detail numerous epidemics of the 15th and 16th century. See chapter Epidemics and Sanitation, pp. 65-111. What will happen with the official archives on Covid-19?

245 Laura Spinney, *Blijedi jahač: kako je španjolska gripa 1918. promijenila svijet* (Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World), VBZ, Zagreb 2019.

pandemics, although they also change our economies, politics, societies and city architecture just as thoroughly”.²⁴⁶

It might seem somewhat strange or irrational to now take the work of a novelist, G.G. Marquez, and his *Love in the Time of Cholera* written in 1985, for the purposes of a broader and more creative analysis of the subject of pandemical thinking and its causes as well as the (long term) consequences. At first analysing a love story at the turn of the 20th century in the Caribbean may look like “missing the target”.

Marquez won the Nobel prize three years before this novel, and the silent questions on the reasons for this comparison may become clearer if we try to find the relation between a fictitious love during the cholera epidemic that actually happened, and the current real emotions and corona pandemic. This disease of the 21st century has already caused unforeseen changes and will in the future influence our emotions ranging from love to hatred.

The novel in fact focuses not on the medical aspects, but on the love relationships and triangles during emergencies. It would be more true to say that it focuses on a somewhat old-fashioned, but quite modern obsession with how things and emotions of fear, love, wonder and expectation, look during times of crisis, especially when we are not certain what is even happening. It should be said that the term cholera in Spanish (*cólera*), can also mean passion or anger, similar to the English adjective *choleric*.

However, why should we use a novel in a discussion like this and find similarities other than the six-letter words (cholera-corona) that give these infectious diseases their names? We do not mention this novel in terms of history (medicine) or historicity of the actors, locations and similarities between the main characters and our lives at the end of the second decade of the third millennium. The more important message is how today’s actors, individuals and the whole society (as well as the media), are facing and will face changes, that are entirely unexpected but at the same time not so surprising.

Will we (ever) forget about the pandemic?

What is the element in which we reinforce the memory and remembrance of the past in terms of the current “passionate” character and background of modern media during the corona crisis? We can use the words of this famous novelist – “From the time the cholera proclamation was issued, the local garrison shot a cannon from the fortress every quarter hour, day and night, in accordance with the local superstition that gunpowder purified the atmosphere. The cholera was much more

246 I. Krastev, *Pandemija nostalgije* (The Nostalgia Pandemic), p. 10. Laura Spinney also adds an interesting note that “it is easier to count those who have been killed by bullets than by the coronavirus.” But there are numerous disagreements and doubts about recorded victims of the coronavirus and the mortality rate, presented in different media, ranging from traditional print press to online news. The criteria are sometimes unclear in media texts and there is a variety of comments and statements by experts, epidemiologists and politicians, who act as official interpreters of the consequences and current news on the coronavirus.

devastating to the black population, which was larger and poorer, but in reality it had no regard for colour or background. It ended as suddenly as it had begun, and the extent of its ravages was never known, **not because this was impossible to establish but because one of our most widespread virtues was a certain reticence concerning personal misfortune**” (text bolded by N.V.).²⁴⁷

The loves in this old novel and our everyday life do not need to be human in their depth or passion, and in their impact on our emotions and impulses for love, anticipation, hope, or dependence. In the historical novel these are human loves, and for us these are media loves, the evidence given by “those in the media sphere” that oxymorically love and hate us at the same time.

During the time of corona these are then “media loves to be recognized, developed and revealed in the relationship between the *public* (made up from individuals) and the *state* of the media, that once served as correctives and mirrors while now they are constructors and active partners to social elites in shaping our mental capacities of (failing to) understand what is happening to us or what has happened to us.”²⁴⁸ Or, as noted by Marquez and the previously mentioned authors, if love and media can change our emotions and ways of thinking and behaviour, they also produce the oblivion of crisis and disasters, and warn indirectly that we should already start thinking about the future post-pandemic thought.

As there have already been repeating periods of great epidemics and multilevel crises throughout history, we should start wondering – what next? We should not forget that we have been “warned” multiple times, in the modern era also through the inescapable role of the media that participated in these chaotic phenomena. We should also learn from the reactions of individuals and the society in recent health crises that brought fear, vaccinations and the humiliating and necessary quarantines and intervention costs. As if following an experiment, media-political psychoses relating to world events appear cyclically – the Western Nile virus in 2002, SARS in 2004, bird flu the following year, swine flu five years later. After a short break, here comes 2014 and the Ebola virus, Zika virus in 2016 and finally Covid-19 which seems to be turning into Covid-21.

The role of rulers (whether by name or actual characteristics), elite groups and social classes during the corona crisis will probably need to be judged and evaluated in the years that follow. However, even now, alongside analyses from the period before the coronavirus, we should note the warnings and statements that served as (now particularly necessary) guidelines and frameworks for professional and ethical judgements on the actual role of some media or mainstream media in the global medical, physical and mental *lockdown* we are currently experiencing.

In a particularly insightful and uncommon way, Sead Alić exposes this role of media institutions alongside the technological development of the media, in his comment that centralized media

247 Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Ljubav u doba kolere*, V.B.Z., Zagreb 2018, p.128; (Love in the Time of Cholera, translated by Edith Grossman; Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1988).

248 N. Vertovšek, *Drveno željezo medija*, p. 156.

houses for publishing books and newspapers “helped” begin the First World War. The radio as a media had a similar role in World War II, while mass media enabled and developed totalitarian systems of the 20th century, as they encouraged the extermination of whole nations and fighting those who think differently.

In several instances Alić therefore emphasizes how philosophy of the media is necessary to truly uncover the hellish nature of the media body and spirit, as well as the vicious symbiosis and misuse of media and technology development. “Human responsibility for every uttered word is multiplied with each technical means that multiplies this word... the task of every serious opinion is then to question the influence of media on the behaviour of individuals and groups, the influence of technologies on human experience and how the multiplication of messages impacts medio(demo)cracy. The manufacture of lowly passions in media consumers is a logical product of liberal capitalism. The consequence is a state of war waged on multiple levels in multiple forms and among different interest groups, organizations and institutions. Television likes wars and helps them, as *Bilwet* would say – survive. But not just the wars waged along different latitudes, but also those within our deep or shallow souls.”²⁴⁹

So if we wonder where we are now and where we are going at the beginning of 2021, it is better not to read and watch frantic forecasts or crazy clowns of modern mass media. We must steer clear of social networks psychopaths, as well as lower our dependence on “serious”, otherwise distinguished experts and politicians with some sense of responsibility. We must recognize those who have sensed like vultures that the coronavirus also brings fear and lack of knowledge – which is their favourite food. Existing hunger nudged into action comedic souls and dangerous couch-generals as well as mental masturbators, frustrated careerists and unrealised instigators of fear and stupidity.

Ivan Krastev already talked and wrote about the deep changes that would be introduced by Covid-19 in modern economy, politics, way of life and everyday relationships. He envisages the dwindling power of the U.S., and the need to transform the European Union if it wishes to keep its integrity after the corona crisis. He sees the past century as a century of separation, marked by the disintegration of globalization trends, and the coronavirus as a crisis and challenge in which one needs to act much faster and wiser than it has been achieved in certain countries, regions, continents or the world as a whole. “I was certain that the world would change, but I did not think that the direction of these changes was predetermined. I also knew our predictions were less reliable even than those first tests for the virus during the early days of the pandemic.”²⁵⁰

In analysing what might actually happen, Krastev offers a careful selection of seven lessons following the emergence of the coronavirus, and later (after lockdowns) he rephrases them as seven paradoxes. The analysis goes deeper but this short summary can provide an overview of the veils that obscure

249 S. Alić, *Masmediji – zatvori bez zidova*, p. 33.

250 I. Krastev, *Pandemija nostalgije*, p. 17. When he discusses the changes brought on by the coronavirus and those it might still introduce, Krastev brightly cites the novelist Stephen Leacock and his *Nonsense Novels*: “Lord Ronald said nothing; he flung himself from the room, flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions”.

our vision. The first paradox is the discovery of the dark side of globalization, to which the pandemic simultaneously acts as an “agent”. The second one is the increased speed of deglobalisation trends but also the revealed limits of renationalization. The third paradox notes that in the early phase the fear of the virus encouraged a state of national unity in various countries, but in the long run it actually deepens existing social divisions.

In the fourth paradox, democracy has been put “on hold” – in the beginning people gave all authority to their governments without question, but the suspension of civil rights will lead to a resistance when health problems are replaced by economic, social and psychological ones. The fifth paradox is the non-participation of the EU during the early stages of the pandemic and the way it almost ignored the problem, but the danger lies not only in new territorial *brexits* but in the fact that the Union itself might become irrelevant. The sixth paradox shows that the pandemic encompasses three earlier crises – the war on terrorism, the refugee crisis and the financial crisis, but at the same time it re-examines and makes possible different outcomes of the final story. The seventh paradox deals with the relative autonomy of individual countries and healthcare systems which led to a situation in which Brussels first represented a symbol of openness and autonomy, but then strict lockdowns and stronger integration became possible in some spheres.

Techno-feudalism and the repression of reality

All of this together reveals influences by several emergency aspects that encourage one another although this has mainly been seen as the process of deglobalization. The crisis of repression and impression of another reality both relate to the information, communication and production environment, the current economic situation as well as forecasts that appear grimmer and worse than the consequences of the pandemic. Maybe that is why mass media, especially those partners to autocrats and unrealized dictators, do not like to talk about this – although fears and anxieties are their sustenance, as they gently avoid the topic of economic disasters.

Is this the media-animalistic instinct through which they sense there is a greater cause for fear than the one they produce every day? However, this Fear might truly scare the media themselves, lulled by news websites and social networks with their heights of hypocrisy and fake news. Do they still think they are immortals of the media, capable of surviving anything? They seem to believe that mere mortals, especially users of social networks, will forever be blinded by their “gifts”, but once they wake up, this might lead to bigger changes in the relationship towards large technological and media companies.²⁵¹

251 Jeffrey Tucker from the American Institute for Economic Research warns that WhatsApp users are choosing other services for encrypted messaging ever since the Facebook-owned app updated its Privacy Policy. He notes that some companies are losing the trust of their customers and “this is actually an important moment on the technology market of social media.” <https://www.logicno.com/politika/zbogom-big-tech-ljudi-gube-povjerenje-u-platforme-drustvenih-medija-tvrdi-ekonomist-za-boom-bust.html> More time will be needed to evaluate the extent and reach of these trends, not only as a reaction to the blocking of Donald Trump.

What of the times after the pandemic? This is a question with certain “traps”. The first one relates to how we have been soothed and distracted – especially by the media – with the notion that this is some “new normal” which would one day in the bright future become the “old normal”. This helped not so much in overcoming the fear and anxiety about corona, but in promoting the hope that all of this would end before the summer of 2020. But as it often happens in fairy tales, especially ones spiced with the predatory aspect of the media, the wait for the new tipping point was prolonged into the autumn and winter of that year, and the whole cycle practically began again at the beginning of 2021. Only now instead of endless discussions on mask-wearing and social distancing, we had the vaccines business, discussion on their form, country of origin etc., the more absurd the better.²⁵²

It would be more correct to expect a “new abnormal” instead of the old normal, if we even need such slogans and sayings. Expressions such as “stay home” or “be responsible”, were compromised (regardless of their good intentions) mostly due to rule violations or inconsistencies, especially in the case of the privileged classes who through violation of the rules during the corona crisis showed their power and special status. They held the power to act according to their own whims, different to what they publicly declared. This unfortunately is a custom inherited from the past, because times of crisis exist, we might say ironically, so that the quasi-elite might show its power and protected status.

And so, following the second wave, it seems that we (again?) ask ourselves, will this ever end? When will the strictest measures stop? Is there another tipping point in store for us – if not “something better”, then definitely “something different”? Some kind of “end” of the pandemic seems possible with warmer days in the Northern Hemisphere, but it remains to be seen whether after the summer passes the old reflex will again crop up, moulding the opinion that an authoritarian approach (or should we say, dictatorship) is just the thing that the confused flock needs.

New social experiments may be next, probably until all the types and forms of vaccines are sold, and the second and/or third doses given, while “the best vaccine” will be determined depending on the ideological and (geo)political situation. If there was a tipping point for pandemical thinking, what can be said of the tipping point at the end of the pandemic cycle, which is always welcome, given the appetites and wishes of the great controllers of our world? This role might be played by new variants of the virus, new viruses, new experiments, but without the detailed analyses and

252 A whole separate paper might be developed on the lucid behaviours and statements by our most prominent experts, for e.g. Krunoslav Capak, director of the Croatian Institute of Public Health. At a press conference of the Crisis Headquarters he said the coronavirus vaccines are not wasted because actually six doses can be extracted from one Pfizer vaccine bottle instead of five as noted by the manufacturer. “Colleagues reported that they managed to get out six or seven doses. We asked for an explanation and Pfizer said this is possible because they had received complaints from other countries. Then they said we would now be charged for 6 doses per bottle” – Capak said. Asked by the journalists how it was possible that the manufacturer was unaware of this fact before, he merely replied “Ask Pfizer...” Available at: <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/capak-javili-smo-pfizeru-da-iz-jedne-bocice-mozemo-navuci-sest-doza-cjepiva-sadnam-vise-naplacuju-1461210>

evaluations of what actually happened previously. There is a possibility that everything will be simply forgotten, like those lessons from epidemics of the past.²⁵³

We showed how Malcolm Gladwell sees rules of emerging epidemics not only in the medical sense, but within the beginnings of new trends, movements and changes in behaviour, habits and thinking. Common rules for the coronavirus, or new trends in fashion in music, as well as important and key changes in psychosocial environment in general, are actually similar and comparable. They are influenced by global changes, but also by small social and economic details which may suddenly – and contagiously – spread to unexpected areas and aspects of life. “Epidemics are strongly influenced by their situation – by the circumstances and conditions and particulars of the environments in which they operate. This much is obvious. What is interesting, though, is how far this principle can be extended. It isn’t just prosaic factors like the weather that influence behaviour. Even the smallest and subtlest and most unexpected of factors can affect the way we act.”²⁵⁴

The special and specific combination of various circumstances, things and facts, may lead to great changes, not only in the health and economic sense, but within the system of thinking, ethical frameworks and seemingly small and unimportant details. Just as in other great epidemics and pandemics, the cause, in this case the Covid-19 virus, is very small, but in the end it very abruptly and dramatically changes the physical and mental capacities of numerous human beings. The return to something “old” is practically impossible, as we are taught by history, and remains at most – a form of nostalgia.

Before Covid-19 the world only seemed to be better, freer and always promoting progress, although warnings already existed, and not only in terms of new epidemics (as we previously listed several different viruses of the early 21st century). This was something the media earnestly and continuously warned us about, and this included the more serious and mainstream media as well as news websites that sprung like mushrooms after an international rainfall. Fareed Zakaria notes that after the Cold War, the new international system was determined by three forces – the geopolitical, economic and technological, reflected in American power, the free market and IT revolution.

All this, aided by globalization, seemed to be leading towards a better and more successful world. But it was still a “world filled with crises – some of which may spin out of our control. These include the Balkan Wars, the Asian financial crisis, 9/11 attacks, the global financial collapse, and now Covid-19. Although all of these constitute different crises, they all have a common key element.

253 Prime Minister Johnson said that the new UK variant of the virus is “70 percent more infectious than the original” (!), which was immediately reported by the diligent media across the EU. This overshadowed difficulties with the first vaccine that was supposed to come from this country but was then stopped when sudden negative side-effects were discovered. Although the WHO said that these new variants are not as dangerous as reported and that vaccines will be effective against them as well, the new Pandora’s box was again opened, bringing in new levels of fear. <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/situacija-s-novim-sojem-eskalira-zemlje-jedna-po-jedna-ukidaju-letove-iz-britanije-svi-cekaju-potez-eu/>

254 M. Gladwell, *Točka preokreta*, pp. 25-26.

All of them appeared as *asymmetrical shocks* – something that begins small, but in the end sends seismic shockwaves across the world.”²⁵⁵

It should be noted that such asymmetrical shocks should be something we have already “learnt” as a society and as individuals, at least those of us for whom history was at least a schoolmate if not a life’s teacher. However, large parts of the masses and the general public, and even the elites – disregarding those who need international shocks for their international businesses – will need to make the physical and mental effort to better understand media messages, consequences of the crisis, totalitarian appetites or technological visions of the future. At the same time they won’t take into account that these are actually different sides of the same paradoxical coin. Sead Alić rightly notes – “totalitarianism is no longer a matter of different parties. It is initiated by technologies that require it. In order to establish a totalitarian society, one needs only a lack of critical faculties. The media initiate everything else by themselves.”²⁵⁶

Zakaria also establishes this well as a message for the future when he says – “The post-pandemic world is going to be, in many aspects, a sped-up version of the world we knew. But when you put life on fast-forward, events no longer proceed naturally, and the consequences can be disruptive, even deadly... life after the pandemic may be different across different countries, companies, and especially individuals. Even if economics and politics return to normal, human beings will not. They will have been through an unusual, difficult trial and have a sense of newfound, hard-won opportunity.”²⁵⁷

One needs to stay focused in this apparent possibility of choice – on the one hand, we will need to have a good long think in order to understand more deeply the unity and connection among different aspects of epidemics. On the other hand it remains to be seen if we will need to repeat all of this at some new tipping point – in terms of healthcare, economy, in the sociological aspect, technological, communication, philosophical... It would appear that this time we almost do not have any other alternative.

Do we really see a possible new tipping point – a type of *techno-feudalism* which we have already tasted in fragments? Another lockdown within territorial borders, no quick travels and new knowledge from other parts of the world through the media and social networks engulfed in everything – fake news stories, word of mouth with no critical analysis, dangers to the body, mind and heart, through stories and fairy tales on huge amounts of money, about noblemen, kings and princesses...

255 F. Zakaria, *Deset lekcija za svijet poslije pandemije*, pp. 18-19.

256 S. Alić, *Masmediji – zatvori bez zidova*, p. 31.

257 F. Zakaria, *Deset lekcija za svijet poslije pandemije*, p. 13.

Will we really wish to return to a sort of Middle Ages and feudal limitations on freedom, the movement of people, goods and capital? With the high level of technological development and focus where one smartphone or android seems like a special steel sword used for ending permanent depression, tension and anxiety, capable of striking the enemy before he strikes at you. What a tipping point for the future!

Merry Crisis and Happy New Fear!

Graffiti by an anonymous author on an unidentified wall, made during the corona crisis, photograph published on Facebook in December 2020.

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Točka preokreta – kada smo, zašto i kako počeli misliti pandemijski?

Sažetak

Između teorija manipulacija i zdravstvene nepogode koja je potresla svijet nalaze se brojni odgovori na pitanja znanstvenika, liječnika, političara i običnih ljudi – gdje je, kada, kako i zašto sve započelo? Obzirom na razne koncepte i ideje o svijetu **korona** budućnosti, bitno je stalno postavljati pitanja i ne (još) priklanjati se jednostavnim i zatupljujućim odgovorima. Svijet medija također je dostigao ili prešao točku preokreta – možemo li se uopće riješiti iluzija kako zaslužujemo nekakvo „novo normalno”. Ili, naprotiv, čeka nas svijet „novog nenormalnog”, ali i uz „staro nenormalno”. Pandemija, s jedne strane, mijenja i mijenjat će ne samo naš način ponašanja, već i naš način razmišljanja, zaključivanja i percepcije svijeta unutar nas i izvan nas. S druge strane, vraćamo li se dijelom i povijesno unatrag, pristajući na polu-diktature, zatvaranja, nekretanja, bezličja i skrivanje osmijeha. Zašto i kako bi filozofija medija mogla pomoći u ovom izazovu mišljenja u nekakvom novom **tehnofeudalizmu**? Hoćemo li nešto naučiti? – moramo se najprije sjetiti legendarne dječje TV serije **Ulica Sezam** i njene revolucionarne spoznaje - djecu možete naučiti nešto samo ako im privučete pozornost...

Ključne riječi: pandemija, kriza, medijske manipulacije, točka preokreta, svijet budućnosti.



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