L'ORDINE DEI DISCORSI

Pandemic Mediations

Media, bodies and borders in the pandemic.

di *Richard Grusin* — 14 Giugno 2021

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My title refers broadly to how pandemics have been mediated through audio-visual technologies and moving images. In talking about pandemic mediation I want to be precise in referring to the "COVID-19 pandemic," not (as US cable news media outlets like CNN or MSNBC have continued to do) the "Coronavirus Pandemic." The coronavirus SARS CoV-2 is not the same thing as the disease COVID-19. Coronaviruses have been around for centuries. SARS CoV-2 is a novel coronavirus, one of seven that have been identified as infecting humans. COVID-19 is the disease that is caused by SARS-Co-2. The pandemic properly refers to the disease, not to the coronavirus that causes it. **These need to be distinguished when talking about different forms of pandemic mediation, which include a multitude of human and nonhuman elements**: the virus SARS-COV-2; the particular viral outbreak COVID-19; fictional pandemics; zoonotic transmission across human and nonhuman bodies; transportation, communication, and commercial infrastructures of global capital; healthcare, biotechnology, and pharmaceutical industries; federal, state, and local agencies; and so forth.

I distinguish here, as I have been doing in different ways for more than 25 years, **between two different understandings of pandemic mediation: its conventional understanding as a form of communication that comes into the picture to provide representations after the event of the pandemic has emerged; and "radical mediation," in which mediation is a place from which thinking and acting have already begun**. To start with mediation is to start in the middle of things rather than at the beginning or the end. Despite its various and controversial origin stories, COVID-19 is best understood as a disease that emerges in the middle of a world in which coronaviruses are always already present.

The radical mediation of COVID-19 is best seen if we take a look at the binding of the S proteins of SARS-CoV2 with ACE2 receptors in human bodies. Viruses, we must remember, are not living cells, but rather «packages of nucleic acid and protein» that need to attach to a host in order to reproduce themselves. Among scientists who study coronaviruses, it is widely understood that «ACE2 mediates SARS-CoV-2 infection». **This nonhuman viral mediation is what creates the disease COVID-19**, the respiratory syndrome produced by the virus entering healthy cells and then reproducing itself according to instructions encoded in its RNA strings. **But even this initial cell entry can be seen as a form of mediation that generates the viral infection**. In other words there are a huge number of airborne SARS-CoV-2 viruses floating around, but the virus only "lives" as an infection after its mediation by a host cell's S-protein. It is wrong to see such mediation as coming after the emergence of the virus and the disease; the radical mediation of S-protein and ACE2 enzyme is what allows the virus to reproduce, and which ultimately generates, with the human and nonhuman co-operation of global capitalism, the COVID-19 pandemic.

As Eben Kirksey has explained, this mediation is indifferent to the philosophical or categorical distinction between humans and nonhumans: «From a viral perspective, the boundaries of different animal species are inconsequential. What matters, as coronaviruses infect animals and humans, is the shape of a specific receptor on the outer membrane of our cells. A certain coronavirus "spike" protein locks on to a receptor called ACE2, producing a fusion of the viral and host cell membranes. If there is a good fit between the spike and the receptor, the virus gets inside». This nonhuman viral mediation is what then creates the disease COVID-19, the respiratory infection produced by the virus entering healthy cells and then reproducing itself. Put more technically: «A large number of glycosylated S proteins cover the surface of SARS-CoV-2 and bind to the host cell receptor angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2), *mediating* viral cell entry». «Similar to other coronaviruses, the S protein of SARS-CoV-2 *mediates* receptor recognition, cell attachment, and fusion during viral

infection». «The S protein binds to ACE2 through the RBD region of the S1 subunit, *mediating* viral attachment to host cells in the form of a trimer».

Some of you might be thinking that this virological definition of mediation means something very different from the way in which we generally understand mediation in the arts, humanities, or social sciences. And this is in part true, particularly if we think of mediation as it has been understood in the Western tradition at least since Hegel. But this virological mediation, I want to argue here, is of a piece with the concept of radical mediation, which pertains to all forms of human and nonhuman, natural and technical, mediation.

To think COVID-19 in terms of radical mediation is to remember that SARS-CoV-2 is "zoonotic," that is, it crosses over from nonhuman to human bodies. David Quammen makes it clear that for zoonotic diseases, there is no categorical or epidemiological distinction between human and nonhuman hosts. **In transgressing the boundaries between humans and nonhumans, COVID-19 also acts as a form of viral mediation that "spills over" the borders from organic to inorganic bodies, from its virological contagion through aerosol droplets to its medialogical contagion through the circulation of print, televisual, and socially networked media**.

There can be no firm ontological boundaries drawn between the COVID-19 pandemic and pandemic mediation in regard to quarantines and other political and social acts of the state. **Put differently, the radical mediation of COVID-19 extends the scope of the pandemic to include its mediation by news, politicians, or the public at large**. This is not to say that the effects of quarantine and other pandemic mediations on human bodies are as severe as the effects of being infected by COVID-19, or (as a large number of politicians and citizens think) that quarantines are bad government policy. It is to say that the ontological spillover of COVID-19 mediation flattens the distinctions between disease and mediation in much the same way that the virus refuses to distinguish between human and nonhuman bodily hosts.

But is there a sense in which the mediations of COVID-19 that I have been discussing are more socially and politically contagious than the virus itself? **Have more people been infected by the mediated fear of the disease than by the disease itself? Perhaps. But I want to make a different but not unrelated point about pandemic mediation—that no ontological distinction can be drawn between the viral disease and its mediation**. COVID-19 mediation is not a form of representation ontologically distinct from the virus, but an intra-action that generates and reproduces the reality of the pandemic in much the same way as the virus itself does.

It is not simply a metaphor to say that in the long 2020 print, televisual, and networked media caught COVID and transmitted it to the public. Unlike the popular notion of computer viruses, **to think the COVID-19 pandemic through radical mediation is not to think in terms of metaphor but metonymy**. **The radical mediation of SARS-CoV-2 is not, like metaphor, separate from and analogous to COVID-19 but metonymically contiguous with it**. This contiguity between medialogical infection and virological infection in one's body or immune system is precisely how scientific accounts employ the concept of "mediation" to describe the operation of SARS-CoV-2 in creating the COVID-19 infection. Although mediation might appear to be used similarly here to its conventional denotation in Western thought, this viral mediation does not strictly stand between the coronavirus aerosol droplets and its human or nonhuman host, or between the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the COVID-19 disease.

Because the virus is parasitic on its host to survive, the mediation of SARS-CoV's entry into the host cell by its surface protein not only constitutes the contagiousness of COVID-19, but its operation in binding to a host is what guarantees its continued existence. **In SARS-CoV-2 and the COVID-19 disease, it is mediation that generates its infectiousness, from the binding together of proteins, genes, and a suitable host**. Without the radical mediation of these specific glycolated S-proteins, which conjoin the virus to the ACE2 receptors in its human or nonhuman host, COVID-19 would not exist.

Nor would pandemic mediation, which remediates and premediates the COVID-19 pandemic through print, televisual, and networked media. Because they do not require contact with specific aerosol droplets but only with packets of mediation, pandemic mediations can be even more easily transmitted than the virus itself. **But such screenic mediations can also work to screen COVID-19 from our bodies and stem the spread of the disease by promoting the changes in individual and collective human behavior that we have all been participating in for the past fifteen months**. We continue not to hold events like this in person, people still hesitate to shake hands or hug one another when they meet, and fundamental public institutions like schools, museums, and libraries have only now begun to re-open.

But in pointing to these changes we can also note that **pandemic mediations worked to encourage the development of immunity to the disease**. **Arguably the most powerful effect of pandemic mediation has been its impact on the development, production, and distribution of vaccines**, whose effectiveness depends upon people being willing and able to take them. Attaining widespread immunity through vaccination in the US (and perhaps elsewhere) can be difficult among people of color with deep historically-

based suspicions of the medical and pharmaceutical industries. Herd immunity through vaccination is also hampered by millions of right-wing Trump supporters who get their news from Fox News and right-wing social media networks, which encourage them to doubt the reality of the pandemic itself and to fear the vaccines. **The epedemiological effectiveness of the vaccine is inseparable from its mediation**. Vaccines will not be able to produce herd immunity if people refuse to take them because they see the pandemic as fake news.

Thus to think the COVID-19 pandemic through the concept of radical mediation is to think the multiple mediations of (to name just a few) state quarantines, viral surface proteins, hospital preparedness protocols, and the efficacy of COVID vaccines. And to think radical mediation in terms of COVID-19 is to remember that in the era of the coronavirus, mediation can no longer be confined to the realm of media and communication but must be theorized as fundamental to the generation and reproduction of what William James calls the «pluralistic universe», of which, not unlike COVID-19 itself, we find ourselves inescapably and unavoidably in the middle.

*This text is an excerpt of the Keynote Lecture that Richard Grusin gave at the NECS Conference 2021, organized by the University of Palermo, coordinated by Alessia Cervini.