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The COVID-19 Crisis and Its Challenges on Social Issues

COVID-19: crisi e sfide nella società

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## *Editorial*

# How Linguistic Analysis Helps Us Understand the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have ushered in a new era of uncertainty around the globe. Misinformation occupies every corner of the internet, and increasingly humans have come to distrust one other and expert sources of information. It is safe to say that the pandemic was a major collective trauma, and that we are only now beginning to understand its deep ramifications for individuals and societies alike. This special issue of *Lingue Culture Mediazioni – LCM* presents a series of articles that explore a variety of these ramifications and their pandemic-era antecedents using diverse data, research methodologies, and underlying theoretical frameworks.

In its recent report titled *The COVID Decade*, the British Academy (2021) emphasizes the long-term impact of the pandemic on three areas of human life: health and wellbeing; communities, culture, and belonging; and knowledge, employment, and skills. The articles in this issue of *LCM* speak to how the written and spoken word illustrate each of these matters. An emphasis on news (real and fake) during the pandemic – both communication of it and interaction with it – ties several of the articles together. This body of work speaks to the British Academy’s (2021) view that the pandemic has had profound effects on human knowledge. Other articles address the toll the pandemic took on “communities, culture, and belonging” by investigating the politics and folklore of the age of COVID-19. A third focus of our issue is on “health and wellbeing”, as authors ask questions about public health communication during the

pandemic and the additional burden it placed on women. Finally, in its reflection on the long-term effects of the COVID-19 crisis, the World Economic Forum emphasizes that the pandemic catalyzed the digital transformation of how we interact, work, and even shop (Willige 2021). Social media figure prominently throughout this issue of *LCM* as we contend with the many ways our lives moved online after March 2020.

Studies show that the COVID-19 pandemic had significant effects on the nature and frequency of many people's news consumption (e.g., Broersma and Swart 2021; Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021). Two articles in this issue add to our understanding of how news stories acted as frames for the collective trauma of the crisis. Olga Denti considers what a *crisis* is in the first place before analyzing which information news stories conveyed about the pandemic, how they conveyed it, and the overarching nature of the narrative these stories ultimately created for their audiences. Ilaria Iori's article is an in-depth look at how leading newspapers in the United States and Australia framed their reporting about the country where the novel coronavirus first broke out, China. To what extent did these papers present information about China in belligerent, culturally demeaning ways? Like three other articles in this issue of *LCM*, Iori's study raises questions about how individuals interacted with news apart from just consuming it. Iori shows how the metaphors she identifies in the corpora she analyzes strengthened ingroup/outgroup boundaries, which surely had deleterious effects on the attitudes Americans and Australians expressed about China. Meanwhile, Maria Cristina Gatti, Cecilia Lazzeretti, and Francesca Vitali present a study that speaks to how organizations made strategic decisions about sharing news. Gatti and colleagues note that the discourse frameworks chosen by tourism communicators in South Tyrol were intended to preserve community in that province, thus shaping the results of how people interact with news. Michela Giordano and Maria Antonietta Marongiu take an entirely different approach to studying interaction with news by emphasizing memes as an aspect of *netlore* (Sánchez 2019), which is a web-based manifestation of folklore based in humor. Giordano and Marongiu note that memes about the pandemic spread nearly as fast as the coronavirus itself did, indicating that people found ways of coping with devastating news through (often dark) humor. Finally, Francesco Nacchia asks how people react when a story news reporting a scientific article dealing with red wine and protection against COVID-19 infection. His analysis of the comments section for this story on the online version of the *Daily Mail* reveals a great deal of sarcasm and distrust among readers.

Fake news comprises a third theme concerning news writ large in this issue of *LCM*. Three other articles devote substantial attention to misinformation and conspiracy theories. Marina Bondi and Jessica Jane Nocella essentially ask whether communication about the COVID-19 vaccine booster might have contravened public skepticism about it after fake news had decreased uptake of the vaccine worldwide. Gaetano Falco's article is a deep linguistic analysis of the discursive construction of fake news on social media during the early months of the pandemic. Laura Olson examines whether and how internet usage might increase perceptions of fake news about COVID-19 and various aspects of U.S. politics.

As mentioned above, social media are at least a tangential focus of many of the articles presented here: Antonella Napolitano presents a critical discourse analysis of replies to a Facebook post by the World Health Organization concerning the "pandemic within a pandemic" of domestic violence. Most directly of all, Andrea Cifalino, Ester Di Silvestro, and Marco Venuti offer a critical discourse analysis of politicians' use of Twitter to speak directly to their constituencies during and about the pandemic.

In addition to its impact on human knowledge, the COVID-19 pandemic had seismic effects on human communities and cultures (British Academy 2021). The articles in this issue of *LCM* shed linguistic light on several ways in which our communities and cultures have been transformed. Public policy is a core concern of Marion Ellison's article; she emphasizes gender-based power differentials in the United Kingdom and the language of public policies designed to address them.

Beyond politics, the pandemic exerted a powerful influence on popular culture and how people used their time. In addition, Carlotta Susca shows in brilliant detail how our virtual lives on Zoom were reflected in special episodes of television programs.

Quite naturally, the British Academy (2021) also emphasizes the profound impact the pandemic had on health and wellness. Maglie and Groicher investigate how podcasts about the coronavirus by high-profile physicians in the U.S. and Australia might have facilitated sense-making and sense-giving about the pandemic among their listeners.

In short, this issue of *Lingue Culture Mediazioni* presents a substantively wide range of articles, but all connect back to the question of how the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed our world. The articles are methodologically diverse as well, with many of the authors engaging in corpus analysis but others taking various other qualitative and quantitative approaches. Theoretically, the work of Ruth Wodak provides a

powerful thread connecting all these works. Wodak's (2021) observations about the significance of discursive frames for coping with the pandemic are especially penetrating and relevant, but her broader critical discursive perspective (Wodak 2011) informs much of the scholarship presented here as well. We are pleased to have had the opportunity to bring together such an impactful group of scholars for this shared effort.

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