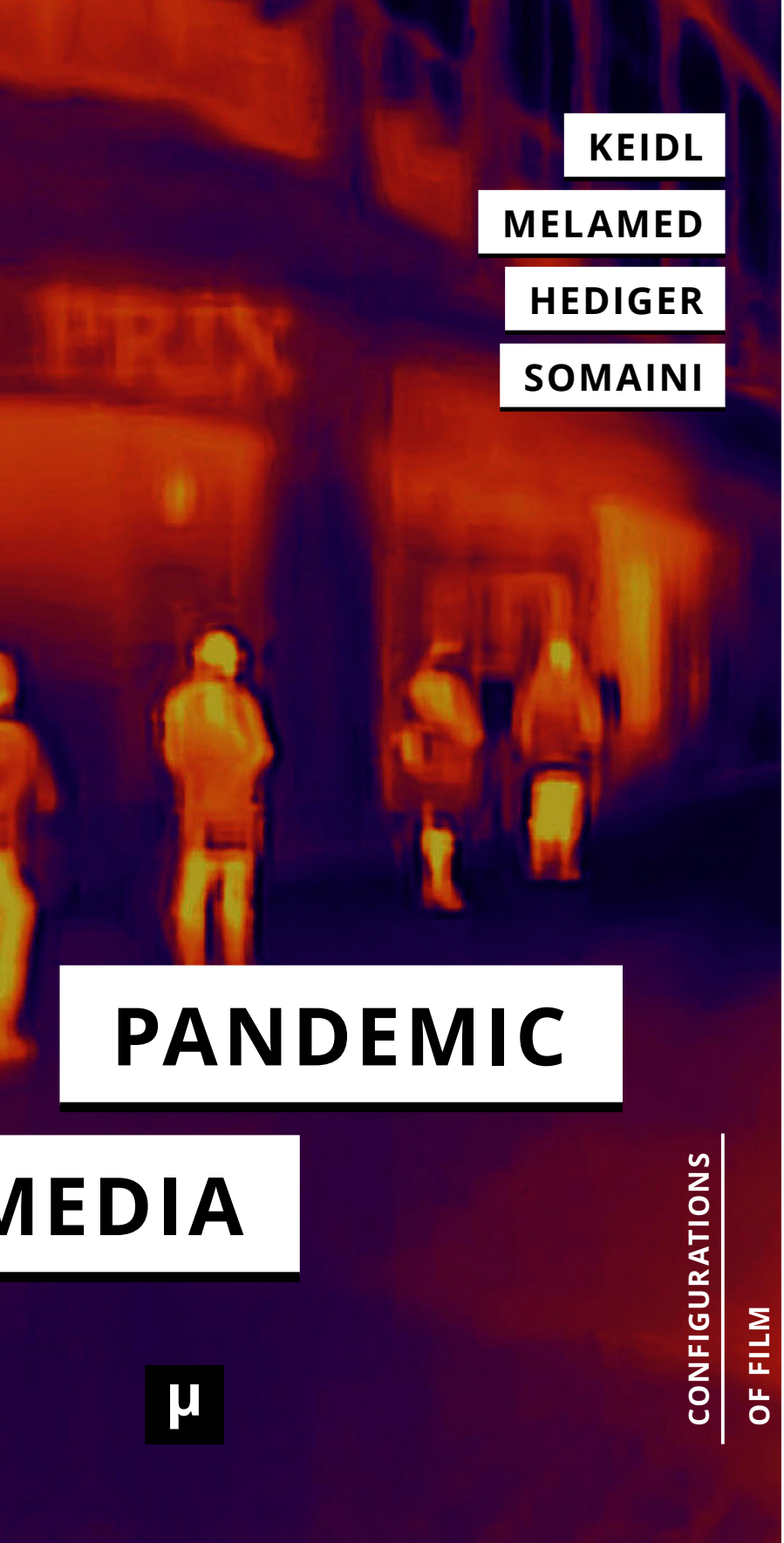

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Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by
Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini

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KONFIGURATIONEN DES FILMS

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INFRASTRUCTURE

MEMBERSHIP GROUPS

ONLINE TEACHING

BLUFF

FORGETTING

[2 8]

Face Off

Kerim Dogruel

The article asks how the shift to online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic is perceived differently by different status groups. Press articles wondered why students didn't show their faces in class. The article explores possible reasons and tries to shift the discussion away from blaming the students and suggests that instead of focusing on generational differences, the situation is better understood with analytical tools from social and media theory, which give special attention to the institutional framework of the university.

When German universities shifted to online classes because of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020, an advanced student described her experience of the situation as if she were in the first semester all over again. Discussing the situation with other students and colleagues from different status groups (ranging from Bachelor and Master students to doctoral students, post-docs, and professors), several stated the opposite: that everything basically stays the same while everyone does the responsible and a little boring thing of staying home. I like to think that both are true. But why does the perception of the same situation differ so greatly? And what does the university as an

institution have to do with it? The student's analogy of being demoted back to the first semester seems to be key, since it describes the critical moment of transitioning into a new learning and working environment. This transition becomes warped during e-learning. This is even more so when the infamous German phenomenon of *Uni-Bluff*—an extracurricular yet crucial behavior that is necessary to successfully navigate university—takes on new forms in the online learning environment.[1] Instead of asking into the intrinsic motivations of the different groups, I want to shift the attention to the infrastructures of digital learning themselves and how they "emerge out of and store within them forms of desire and fantasy" (Larkin 2013) that effect the different groups in different ways.

The student described her membership status at university that was somehow lost through the pandemic and now had to be regained again. For the other group, their membership status was never in jeopardy. To better understand the different variables of the situation, the theoretical framework of Star, Bowker, and Neumann provides the tools to make sense of the two different perceptions. Both groups are part of the same *community of practice*:

> A *community of practice* is a group of people joined by conventions, language, practices, and technologies .... It may or may not be contained in a single spatial territory; in the modern information world, it often is not. It contains strong ties that are not covered by the terms *family*, *formal organization*, or *voluntary association*. (Star, Bowker, and Neumann 2003, 243)

While some of the most important social interactions at university take place in classrooms, the communal learning experience shifted because of the pandemic. The social interactions from the classroom and everything in between, from hallways, to libraries, cafeterias, blackboards, and restrooms, collapsed and could only partially be replaced or addressed through online infrastructures, if they were addressed at all. Goethe University Frankfurt bought bulk licenses of videoconferencing software, additionally the already existing infrastructures for e-learning were strengthened and expanded. Zoom was quickly established as the software of choice for most teaching purposes. The videoconference software was added to the other *information artifacts*, as one of many "tools, systems, interfaces, and devices for storing, tracking, displaying, and retrieving information" (Star, Bowker, and Neumann 2003, 244). *Communities of practice* and *information artifacts* depend on each other. When

1 Wagner has described the bluff in his book *Uni-Angst und Uni-Bluff*, which was published in three very different editions in 1977, 1992, and 2007. Only in his latest edition does Wagner accept the bluff as a necessity. Thomas Waitz provides an analysis of the changes between the editions throughout the years (see Waitz 2019). For this text, I'll primarily use the latest edition of the book. English lanugage quotes from Wagner are my translation.

they converge and the community standard becomes more and more transparent to the individual, membership is achieved. Yet membership is not a rigid category, but rather a trajectory that shapes the individual in the process. An important part of that process is the transformation of self-imagination: "the shaping of individuals so that they see themselves as having the set of information needs that can be met by their new social world's information resources" (Star, Bowker, and Neumann 2003, 245). You can see yourself as part of that world when you have a clear idea of what your place in it could be. Students that didn't have any trouble adjusting to the new learning environment could literally see themselves within the university framework.

Since my own transition from being a student to becoming a teacher wasn't that long ago, I was wary of the side-effects and outside perceptions of me as a teacher. All the menial tasks that come with getting started at an institute, ranging from uploading photos for the institute-website, signing forms to get access to an institutional email-address, setting up institute email signatures, validating your university employee ID, setting up keys to get access to offices and classrooms, slipping in and out of these spaces, using the already familiar learning management system with an enhanced and more powerful interface, made me wary of the transition myself. But they also signaled to the outside that I now had become part of the institution. I already had teaching experience from outside university, but the change in status that came with it was very different from other learning environments, mostly because it's an institution that can itself grant status—regardless of whether I liked that or not.[2] Even though I had taught university seminars prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had not done it often enough for it to have become a habit yet. To continue working "as always" is impossible if "always" is a time-span of two years.

After the first few classes during the pandemic, I had the same conversation with different colleagues individually who had decided to structure their classes through weekly videoconferences. They were confused, surprised, or even slightly offended by students who didn't turn on their cameras in class.[3] Empty squares caused insecurities. The gridded structure of the videoconference homogenizes, each square is equally visible, regardless of what it contains (see Higgins 2009, 9). At the same time the grid signals the inherent power imbalance between teacher and student, host and guest, much more than a classroom could—the grid is a visual testament to the power of the person that has control over it (see Siegert 2003, 95). Paradoxically, the

2 The main takeaway of Wagner's 2007 edition of the book is that the increase in status (both morally and financially) is a real and valid reason for many students to attend university, therefore the necessity to master the bluff without succumbing to it (see Wagner 2007, 31–36).

3 Besides the obvious technological reasons of not having the necessary hardware available or not having a stable connection.

invisible students become more visible through this equal treatment of every rectangle.

> And the whole time all I could focus on was the sea of blank avatars—rather than actual faces—staring back at me. Why did it matter? Why had students decided to turn off their camera? To be honest, I took it a bit personally. (Eng 2020)[4]

I don't want to guess about the individual agreements that were and are being made in class in the first few meetings. Likewise I'm not trying to explain every possible reason for students not to show their faces on camera. What interests me are the reasons that might lie in the existing and newly facilitated infrastructures of the university itself. Setting up rules for class is important and shapes the direction for what will happen for the rest of the semester, how to work and how to play together. But already before individual rules can be established, students enter the classroom with their own expectations, fears, and desires.

It's a crucial moment, which is particularly strong in the first session of a semester, and even stronger with freshmen students. Wolf Wagner explores the special connection between the face and the status of first semester students at German universities in what he calls the fear of the "smart face": "A face that doesn't show its fear, but covers it up by an emphasized natural, relaxed and confident demeanor"[5] (Wagner 2007, 66). Wagner describes the fine details and micro gestures of students when they enter a classroom full of other people they don't know. It's an anatomy of the process of projection in which the individual student's fear of failure manifests itself in the faces of the other students, who therefore appear as carriers of all "objectified requirements of the university system" (Wagner 2007, 66). The "smart face" becomes operationalized and is appropriated as a bluffing behavior that serves the purpose of navigating the very same system. It's not only a question of pose or appearance, but a bluff that consists of a wide variety of different expressions, especially in writing and speech.

> Just like when an uncertain hand in poker should appear better than it really is, the scholar makes him or herself appear a little better, smarter, more well-read, more knowledgeable, and more profound than he or she

4 Also: "Why won't the students show themselves? Hoppe can only guess: … She also suspects that sometimes there is actually no one sitting behind the black screens" (Wiarda 2020, 35–36, my translation); "Even though they have been socialized with digital media, students turn off their cameras in videoconference seminars. Why?" (Kirchmeier 2020, my translation).

5 Wagner reasons that—while there is arrogance in other university systems (he discusses the USA and England in more detail)—the bluff is particular to German universities because of their devaluation of teaching in academic performance reviews. He characterizes it as a university system than overvalues research reputation while almost completely neglecting teaching performance (see Wagner 2007, 92–96).

> really is. It happens out of reflex that has been rehearsed more than a thousand times …. (Wagner 2007, 55)

While these types of bluffing appear in a similar form in everyday life, they become more nuanced and integral in the university context. Almost everything in the academy has to do with communication, yet the bluff actively impairs it. Since freshmen have fewer cards to draw from, their bluffing is more severe, and riskier to pull off. But learning to bluff, how and when to put on a "smart face," is also an expression of attained university membership within the German context. It's a tacit knowledge that has nothing to do with the content of your studies. Brave students that have less trouble bluffing learned "behavior instead of content" (Wagner 2007, 67), behavior that is part of an invisible curriculum. "The result is mutual isolation that appears as arrogance" (Wagner 1973, 61).

The gridded videoconference classrooms ask for a different mode of perception and participation in which every articulation is mediated.[6] In an all-digital learning environment, everything seems to be readily available at one's fingertips. But infrastructures are paradoxical (see Star 1999, 386–87), and a seemingly straightforward task can turn into an array of little steps that are scattered in different digital places and need their own approach that ranges from separate log-ins to dedicated streaming websites, following extra links that accommodate an unusually large file, organizing the digital literature and material, writing emails and texts to stay in touch with the teachers, with other students, etc. The visible articulation is only possible because of a second invisible layer.

> The other is the process of assemblage, the delicate, complex weaving together of desktop resources, organizational routines, running memory of complicated task queues …, and all manner of articulation work performed invisibly by the user. (Star 1999, 386–87)

These invisible tasks not only surround the online classes, they are part of them as well and are put into practice through countless clicks: muting, unmuting, screen-sharing, switching between the grid-view and the speaker's view, setting up smaller groups for discussion, opening and closing the chat window, switching between pdfs and the window of the videoconference. Click, click, click, click, click.

> At a phenomenological level, what has happened is that these slight impediments have become magnified in the flow of the work process. An

6 "In order to exist, their organic bodies are hidden behind an indefinite series of semio-technical mediations, an array of cybernetic prostheses that work like digital masks: email addresses, Facebook, Instagram, Zoom, and Skype accounts. They are not physical agents but rather tele-producers … " (Preciado 2020).

> extra keyboard stroke might as well be an extra 10 pushups. (Star 1999, 386)

The impediments that cannot be pictured form an additional barrier to the not-so-brave student. Membership in the digital learning environment becomes even harder to attain for some students, therefore the feeling of being in the first semester all over again. It might not be enough to make sense of every student that decides not to show their face in an online class, but it further complicates the possible motivations or rather demotivations brought by the shift to online teaching. To characterize the situation as a symptom of the overall alienation of a generation (see Kirchmeier 2020) is misguided, since it blanks out the different membership statuses of all the people involved and overvalues the importance of the classroom in contrast to the rest of campus life. The difference in perception is also caused by the forgetting[7]:

> For the mature researcher, it is easy to forget the barriers and blockages that the newcomer faces; as communities of practice converge with wider-scale information systems, the categories come to seem entirely natural rather than negotiated. (Star, Bowker, and Neumann 2003, 251)

When the process of seeing oneself in another light is mandatory to obtain membership status at university, it could be a good exercise to imagine oneself as outside of it from time to time.

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7 Wagner also addresses the forgetting: "Since I've known the academy, I've been constantly accompanied by colleagues whining about how much worse current students are than those of the past. It might absolutely be that this has to do with the growing glorification of one's own student past" (Wagner 2007, 70).

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Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini (eds.)
Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

With its unprecedented scale and consequences the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new configurations of media. Responding to demands for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, these "pandemic media" reorder social interactions, spaces, and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration of media technologies and the cultures and polities with which they are entangled. Highlighting media's adaptability, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in response to the global crisis and provide elements toward an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.

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