Editorial: "Performing control" of the COVID-19 crisis

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Editorial on the Research Topic
"Performing control" of the COVID-19 crisis

Power is performative and performance is power. Our collection testifies performance of crisis and of power in the inevitably uncontrollable situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Political will and collective subject were articulated to address the crisis and the enemy that was slowly becoming more possible to tackle. Neither the process of the virus nor its response was even: in each context, leadership was performed, and it evoked contestation. The Research Topic *"Performing control" of the COVID-19 crisis* includes 11 articles analyzing the responses to COVID-19 in nine countries. In 2020, we expected to see curbing-in nationalism and performance of statehood, contestation between the various levels of administration and expertise. The articles, carried out by 19 researchers from the universities in eight countries, give testimony of the early pandemic and develop new methods to study social media and government relations from Europe to Aoteaora New Zealand from a diversity of discursive-rhetorical perspectives (Table 1).

One of the main performances dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic was the strategy regarding the limits and the justifications of sovereign power. Considering Judith Butler's approach with affect theory, Lehtinen and Brunila argue that the management of the pandemic reveals both the political ontology of war central to the foundation of our political communities and how this ontology is used by the nation state to manage feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Arguably, this frame leads to failure, influencing a potentially racist and nationalist affective climate in which the "enemy" is no longer felt to be the virus, but members of other nations as well as minorities.

Pandemic-performative power relations were different in each of the case countries. Even in the European Union the restrictive nature of the policy options chosen, and the severity of their enforcement mechanisms varied considerably across countries. However, the structural determinants of each country shaped policy-making decisions more than the factors related to the magnitude of the crisis at stake, as the article by Egger et al. underlines by analyzing several countries' first responses.

Most of the articles studied social media to understand pandemic performances of control. The first of the cases was Italy. Blasio and Selva highlight the emotional repertoire mobilized by the Italian government in its communication: the ability to display empathy toward citizens' sufferings, the will to engage in dialog with social stakeholders, confidence in expertise, and the pride and determination to negotiate within the EU. In this early stage, the performance of the prime minister in expressing his emotional states has nurtured the conception of post-COVID statehood, consolidating his individual leadership and flawing the spaces of political conflict.

Through a contrasting case in which a nation shielded itself from the virus, Gilray analyses the Aotearoa New Zealand response to COVID-19, considered by popular assessment to have been successful, by a mixed methods and data approach. The research identifies three distinct nodal points that unfolded as key to the nation's ability to control the pandemic—the hegemonic "us"; iwi regionalism; and the rhetoric of kindness, although not without aspects of the antagonisms that also beset other nations. In also less affected Finland, Koljonen and Palonen analyse the interaction between the citizen's "hashtag landscape" and the Sanna Marin's all-female government, comparing regular government and authorities' info sessions and Twitter flow. The research shows the Finnish government's attempt to communicate to different audiences and to express control in the 1st year of the pandemic.

Contestation between local and federal levels (Germany) and the capital's locals and the president (Czech Republic) appears also through onsite/online mobilisations and images. Volk's analysis of local, state and federal level communication in Angela Merkel's Germany emphasizes the different political styles of performing and contesting institutional control and reveals that political performances of control were closely linked to articulations of democracy as an empty signifier, and to claims for safeguarding democratic principles as such. Hartikainen, studying Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš' Facebook profile in the two peak moments of the crisis in the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, explores how a technocratic populist can visually perform the authenticity and connection to "the low" as key to a populist performance while also maintaining the performance of expertise that is central to technocratic populist success.

TABLE 1 Summary of the Research Topic "Performing control" of the COVID-19 crisis.

References	Article	Focus/country	Method	Data/actors
Lehtinen and Brunila	A Political Ontology of the Pandemic: Sovereign Power and the Management of Affects through the Political Ontology of War	Theoretical	Affect theory; Butler	Nation states, war
Egger et al.	I Do it My Way: Understanding Policy Variation in Pandemic Response Across Europe	Comparative/Multi	Bootstrapped bivariate analysis; Three policy-making scenarios	Policy responses implemented in 23 European Union countries
Volk	Political Performances of Control During COVID-19: Controlling and Contesting Democracy in Germany	Multi-level policy and protest/Germany	Discourse theory; Online ethnography	Ethnographic online data (Merkel [federal], Kretschmer [Saxony], PEGIDA [Dresden])
Linnamäki	Gendered Articulations of Control and Care on Social Media During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Hungary	Gender in social media/Hungary	Discourse theory; Qualitative Content analysis	Official and social media website data (Orbán, Hungarian government, Operational Group)
Blasio and Selva	COVID-19 in Italy: Performing Power and Emotions	Emotions in governance/Italy	Discourse–historical approach (DHA)	Press conferences, interviews, addresses, TV-appearances (PM Conte)
Gilray	Performative Control and Rhetoric in Aotearoa New Zealand's Response to COVID-19	Government, Māori communities/New Zealand	Rhetoric-performative discourse theory	Official and social media website data (Government and health authorities)
Chiruta	The Representation of Roma in the Romanian Media During COVID-19: Performing Control Through Discursive-Performative Repertoires	Media scapegoating ethnic minority/Romania	Discourse analysis; Post-foundational discourse theory	The main Romanian broadcasters; online news portals
Palau-Sampio	Pseudo-Media Sites, Polarization, and Pandemic Skepticism in Spain	Disinformation on pseudo-media sites/Spain	Content analysis; framing analysis	Pseudo-media sites
Koljonen and Palonen	Performing COVID-19 Control in Finland: Interpretative Topic Modelling and Discourse Theoretical Reading of the Government Communication and Hashtag Landscape	Government-citizen communication/Finland	Rhetoric-performative discourse theory; Topic modelling	Twitter; videos of government info sessions (Finnish Government and Health Authorities, Twitter public)
Hartikainen	Authentic Expertise: Andrej Babiš and the Technocratic Populist Performance During the COVID-19 Crisis	Populist leadership/Czech Republic	Performative analysis	Facebook data (PM Babiš)
Turunen et al.	Performing control in the Swedish Twitter sphere or: How a 1920s' Russian linguist helps us understand dynamics of digital authority	Digital authority/Sweden	Voloshinov's reported speech, Digital authority	Tweets (Governmental health authorities and popular responses)

The performance of control also strengthened stereotypes in the dynamics of crises. The Hungarian government's Facebook communication during the first wave of the pandemic revealed to Linnamäki a reinforcement of the traditional gender roles division: care work was performed as a female task, police and military masculinity were called on to tackle the control of potential disruption of the system of care. Analyzing Romanian early pandemic media narratives, Chiruta uncovered how historical patterns of stigma vis-à-vis Roma communities in Eastern Europe were activated by sensationalizing the episodes in the pandemic involving the Roma minority, employing a logic of polarization to assist the authorities in retaking control of the pandemic and health crisis in Romania.

Palau-Sampio article from Spain shows that along with social media platforms, pseudo-media contributed to producing and disseminating misleading content during the pandemic. She points to the framing of measures to stop the virus as harmful and ineffective, especially regarding vaccination. Clear links emerged with the far-right ideology and a polarized discourse with belligerent, offensive expressions to refer to institutions and to disseminate conspiracy theories and disinformation.

In the Research Topic, particular attention is paid to how (social) media was used, and it opens up many avenues to study the discursive performance of control. For example, Koljonen and Palonen combine Laclaudian discourse theory with LDA topic modeling in a novel way. Studying Sweden, Turunen et al. apply Valentin Voloshinov's classical theory on reported speech, developed in the 1920s, to the concept of digital authority in the Twitter-sphere of the 2020s. In this last article of the set, the authors draw on data from four Swedish state agencies during the first 15 months of the COVID-19 crisis. Findings underline that retweets are generally used to affirm and spread information, thus strengthening the digital authority of the origin of the tweet, whilst replies and quote-tweets are used to undermine the credibility of the sender and the content of the original tweet, often by resorting to irony. Criticism increased as the pandemic advanced.

The comparison emerging from these papers underlines the value of first-response studies and interpretive approaches to pandemic, hybrid-mediatized politics providing more nuanced understandings of the relationships between the pandemic and democracy in a situation of an ultimate lack of control.

Author contributions

DP-S has listed the arguments of each author. EP edited the argument, sequence, the abstract, and compiled the table that DP-S edited. DQ and VS have provided excellent comments and contributions in the editorial of the topic everyone has contributed as editors. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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