

## Resilience of Public Spheres in a Global Health Crisis

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Working Paper

# **Resilience of Public Spheres in a Global Health Crisis**

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Barbara Pfetsch

August 2020

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# **Resilience of Public Spheres in a Global Health Crisis**

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August 2020

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted “normal” modes of public sphere functioning and activated an experimental mode of coping, reinventing forms of publicness and communicative exchanges. We conceptualize the social responses triggered by the crisis as particular forms of public sphere resilience and assess the role of digitalisation and digital spaces in the emergence of distinct modes and dynamics of resilience. Four areas of enhanced public sphere experimentation are the basis of our conceptualisation: political consumerism, digital modes of solidarity, political protest mobilisation, and news consumption. We discuss overarching features of public sphere resilience across societal sub-spheres and highlight the dynamics and hybridities which structure the emerging public spaces. Resilience practices are accompanied by dynamics of politicisation and depoliticisation coupled with shifting boundaries of publicness and privateness. Our observations likewise reveal the dynamic interplay between resilience and resistance.

# 1. The Crisis as a Catalyst for (New Forms of) Digital Public Spheres

The Covid-19 pandemic of spring 2020 led within a very short time to a halt of our social life. Public spaces had been closed off for physical encounters, analogue social and professional relationships were restricted to a minimum and most people were forced to retreat to the privacy and intimacy of their family relationships. It would however be erroneous to assume that the Corona crisis simply suspended public life. Instead, it disrupted and redirected it. While part of the available infrastructure of the public sphere for physical gatherings and participation did not work anymore, the crisis also brought along a great need to inform, to communicate, to coordinate and make decisions – both with respect to “private” and “public” life. The standstill of public life and the forced retreat to privacy were further combined with an acceleration of the spread of news and the intensification of news consumption. On the one hand, access to news was crucial to gain information for survival and to escape isolation. On the other hand, the steady flow of negative news increased uncertainty and enhanced fears.

The Covid-19 crisis can, in this sense, be said to disrupt “normal” modes of public sphere functioning in the form of providing audiences with reliable and necessary information, giving them orientation and facilitating participation in public life. In this normal mode, the public sphere functions as an “uncertainty reducing mechanism.” Knowledge is accumulated, shared and channelled in a way to facilitate informed public opinion and will formation. In the exceptional mode under the Corona pandemic, public spheres need to function under conditions of enhanced uncertainty: knowledge is not (yet) available, orientation is lost and information that can be used for political participation is largely unreliable and/or can be contested.

This paper deals with the question how the Covid-19 health crisis has impacted on the public sphere. Our main argument is that the kind of social responses triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic will not simply intensify existing trends of public sphere disruptions but has provoked particular forms of public sphere resilience. Instead of social disorder or normlessness, the public sphere during the forced isolation of its actors rather bounced back and activated an experimental mode of coping, reinventing forms of publicness and engaging in communicative exchanges as an escape from standstill and from imposed privacy. If physical places are closed down, the virtual public sphere (and hasn't the modern public sphere always been virtual?) not only continues, but even intensifies its dynamic exchanges and engages in new practices. Such an intensification of our virtual encounters is made possible, above all, through the creative

use of digital media technologies. Digital spaces become more important in response to both the inaccessibility of shared physical spaces and the overburdening of the traditional news space paired with an abundance of negativity and uncertainty. That is, the “chaos” and breakdown of some infrastructures leads to a rise in experimentation with and use of digital infrastructures in order to cope with emerging problems in the public and private realm.

The potential of digitalisation to foster the resilience of public spheres in response to crisis shall be investigated in this paper. We will discuss three dimensions of the public sphere under the pandemic and pose three interrelated research questions:

*Modes of functioning of the public sphere:* How do public spheres and the relevant actors and publics switch from routine to emergency mode in response to this crisis? How do digital media support or undermine such shifts?

*Resilience:* What is the role of digital spaces during the pandemic? How do digital media meet fundamental needs of users and in the crisis enhance their capacities to survive and/or reduce their uncertainties?

*Resistance:* When and how does resilience become political, i.e. is linked to the contestation of political choices and government? How are resilience practices translated into forms of political action and what is the role of digital media in facilitating this political mobilisation?

We will discuss the switch from routine modes of public debate to experimental modes of public sphere resilience in relation to four cases: political consumerism, neighbourhood solidarity, political mobilisation and news consumption. As we will be able to show, resilience, in all four cases, is triggered as a response to enhanced uncertainty, when routine ways of communication are (temporarily) unavailable and existing capacities of the public sphere to provide knowledge and information and to give orientation become insufficient or even collapse. We will collect evidence for each case of how established routines of communication became disrupted/dysfunctional and how new experimental modes were introduced to respond to the inadequacy of existing public sphere infrastructure. We will further collect examples for the creative use of digital media technologies to maintain public communication and cope with uncertainty. Resilience results from such an individual or collective engagement in public sphere experiments.

## 2. Public Sphere Transformations During the Pandemic

### 2.1. Public Spheres vs. Public Space

Restrictions of access and of activities as they applied during Corona lockdowns, such as those preventing political rallies, are rather high barriers for the unfolding of public sphere dynamics. Urban spaces become a public sphere in the important sense that they allow individuals to leave their private households for public affairs. Such escapes from privateness into publicness are however not simply facilitated by physical movement (leaving the private space and entering the public) but through the use of the media. The lockdown of physical spaces of encounter can therefore leave the core of the modern public sphere, which is not so much a space to assemble, but an open communication system for the unfolding of discourse among anonymous members of the public (Neidhardt 1994), intact. Such a (by default) virtual sphere of communicative exchanges among strangers is not immediately affected by the lockdown of local spaces of encounters. To the contrary, it might be even enhanced. Anonymous exchanges might intensify, if private or semi-private relationships are closed. We are interested here however not so much in the possibilities for a physical escape from private to public but in how the conditions for an escape into publicness were also set by the creative use of digital media. Such creative uses are not simply linked to virtual exchanges protected by the anonymity of mass communication, but often include possibilities for “real encounters” as well as assemblies. The way people “gather” through the use of digital media thus combines all levels of publicness: semi-private encounters, purposefully organised groups, more loosely organised online communities and anonymous mass publics with often floating transitions between the different levels of organisation.

It further needs to be clarified that new public spaces as they might be facilitated through the use of digital media in a situation of societal lockdown are not to be taken as a new public sphere as long as they do not embrace the normative dimension that distinguishes the modern public sphere of democracy. As rightly pointed out by Papacharissi (2002, 11) online exchanges as facilitated in cyberspace provide new public spaces, but do not necessarily open up a new type of public sphere. Necessary elements for understanding digital spaces as public spheres are (1) their structural openness for participation; (2) that the communication enables the (self-)observation of society through transparency, orientation and validation of public discourse; and



(3) that some ideal of democracy is recognised through public debate of equal access, inclusion and self-determination of speakers. The question thus is how during the crisis publicness is sustained and promoted by digital media use and how the ideals of the public sphere are embraced by these practices.

## 2.2. Resilience

Resilience in the social sciences has been defined as “bouncing back” of individuals or collectives in a situation of distress or emergency (Birkland 2016; Aguirre 2006). It is an adaptive response to the unexpected effects of disaster or crisis after they have become manifest. As such, it is related to the capacities of organisations, collectives or individuals to face and to master a single or a series of disruptive events (crises) through the use of their own resources.

A strategy of resilience requires reliance on experience with adverse consequences once they occur in order to develop a capacity to learn from the harm and bounce back. Resilience, therefore, requires the accumulation of large amounts of generalizable resources, such as organisational capacity, knowledge, wealth, energy, and communication, that can be used to craft solutions to problems that the people involved did not know would occur. Thus, a strategy of resilience requires much less predictive capacity but much more growth, not only in wealth but also in knowledge (Wildavsky 1988, 77).

To talk of resilience of the public sphere relates to new experimental modes of publicness, reinventing forms and engaging in practices of publicness as an escape from standstill but also from imposed privacy. Within the field of public sphere and civil society, we are particularly interested in the possibility of “citizens’ resilience” relating to a broad range of social practices of *coping* with crisis that are developed through private initiatives (though variously linked to state, local government or enterprises). Citizens’ resilience is linked to collective practices that are incremental and cannot be planned, strategically employed or steered. As such, resilience needs to be distinguished from *resistance*, which is manifested in the active mobilisation, non-compliance or civil disobedience of particular groups which drive for social change instead of restoration. Social movement scholars therefore typically link resistance to disadvantaged groups (Bieler 2011), while resilience is primarily used by those groups who wish to maintain the status quo or re-establish previous order. We will see, however that citizens’ resilience to crisis can comprise both adaptation and contention. Citizens’ resilience is also not necessarily reduced to the dimension of “bouncing back” and

re-establishing lost stability, but also opens opportunities for “bouncing forward” and gaining through the development of new skills and capabilities.

Public sphere scholars are typically interested in forms of resistance and contentious politics, and not resilience, which is often considered to be linked to private and non-political activities. Against this, we wish to bring in citizens’ resilience as a neglected field of public sphere research. Our argumentation focuses on examples for practices of resilience that are constitutive to public sphere dynamics. Thus, resilience and resistance are not simply antonyms, but can be seen as complementary, e.g. in the local initiatives which combine first aid with a voice for the protection of minorities and vulnerable groups. Thus, we combine our discussion of resilience practices with a consideration of resistance actions, and possible transitions from resilience to resistance. Citizens’ resilience can have a political intention but does not need to. This implies that not all forms of resilience developed by citizens necessarily aim at a recovery of the public sphere. Resilience practices can unfold in the private or be restricted to market activities. We would, for instance, expect that many practices of resilience in response to Covid-19 are primarily targeted at recovery of personal well-being or survival in the market. However, experimental modes of publicness often encompass private and public life and bridge economic and political activities. As such, they can also be applied to more explicit forms of contentious action. Resilience here manifests itself in those practices in which collective action does not primarily aim at overcoming pandemic induced negative effects on personal life but responds to the Covid-changed environment and possibilities for mobilisation with adaptation and relocation of pre-existing movements. In terms of more specific modes of resilience, adaptation relates to those forms of activism which were still possible in public spaces, even under the restricted circumstances (for instance, street protests by maintaining distance). Relocation, meanwhile, refers to the transfer of contentious politics to digital public spheres as a response to the crisis-imposed closure of physical space, or to hybrid variants of online and offline mobilisation. It is paramount to differentiate those forms of resilience in response to the inaccessibility of public spheres as such from forms of resistance in response to the crisis and its management.

### **2.3. Digital Affordances**

The health crisis has been another push factor of digitalisation at a global scale and in almost every aspects of our lives. Thus, with the availability and the affordances of digital information and platform technology, social media communication platforms and

microblogging, the smartification of everyday life, the penetration of artificial intelligence and deep learning solutions in connection with network technology, the global health crisis has triggered a boost of technological change at a degree never seen before. Thus, neither the technological change nor the social consequences of the health crisis can be assessed without relating them to the affordances of digitalisation.

Digital affordances facilitate a new form of publicness in response to the global health crisis, which consists in mutual observation and comparison of societies across the globe. This encompasses comparison of the development (or the neglect thereof) of digital affordances and solutions. Countries which have been lagging behind in the development of their digital infrastructure are suddenly confronted with their deficits of technological advancement. Holding up a mirror in Europe, comparisons with countries in South East Asia such as China or South Korea demonstrate that European countries have a lot to catch up. At the same time the social, political and economic structures are operating differently in Europe and require different solutions. The rapid information flows which were enabled by digital media and platforms also triggered processes of mutual observation between countries or between different regions within a country. The standstill and restrictions to fundamental rights of movement or freedom of assembly have been legitimised by pointing at the pictures and policies of other countries. Such an enhancement of publicness through mutual observation can be seen as a response to the fact that the pandemic affected regions and local communities differently, as some regions turned into hotspots while others remained less affected.

The global health crisis pushed digitalisation into various areas of the life world and enhanced technological change in sectors that were previously dominated by assembly publics. With the lockdown and the closing of kindergartens, schools and institutions of higher education, the access and availability of digital media have suddenly become essential tools of social exchange in civil society as well as in family and business. The shutdown of production and service industries provoked people's lockdown in their homes, meaning their work could only be upheld through personal computers, digital equipment and security software. As shops and public services closed down, digital devices, smartphone apps and computers kept the service industry alive and boosted e-business and shopping. With social distancing and restrictive rules of staying home, social media and platforms of meeting, blogging and messaging (such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter and many more) provided the most basic functions of communication and social relations between families, friends and neighbours. The same devices were used by governments to inform their people about the state of the

crisis on a daily basis. During the health crisis, digitalisation was the backbone for upholding the most fundamental functioning of politics, culture and society.

The social consequences of digitalisation in the Covid-19 pandemic must not be interpreted in a deterministic way but need to be understood in how they reciprocate with their users. The appropriation of digital affordances eventually provoked contradictory developments and pointed to tensions in coping with the social and political consequences of the crisis. On the one hand, digitalisation unleashed enormous potentials of innovation (e.g. the Corona Dashboard of Avi Schiffmann) as the crisis came with an enormous need for information and for coping with essential threats of health and wellbeing (on the individual and societal level). Creativity went into the invention of new applications which were possible through the harvesting of (health) data. On the other hand, the example of China showed digital tools to cope with the situation include surveillance, political control and further restrictions of individual freedom and rights. It is in this tension between innovation and control that public space and eventually public sphere evolves and provokes practices of resilience and resistance that are acted out with digital media.

We will discuss the practices of resilience and the use of digital affordances as they relate to changes in the public sphere in three different sectors of society, namely the economy, civil society and the media. Moreover, we believe that the dynamics of resilience as a response to the crisis might be best observed in local spaces and neighbourhoods. In cities like Berlin for instance, the local neighbourhood in the urban centre with all its social functions is called a “Kiez”. The Kiez denotes a particular milieu which includes a lifestyle that is informal, creative and open since it lives through the interaction of an established neighbourhood with strangers such as visitors or tourists (Till 2005). Most importantly, the Kiez already builds on informal networks that link to other (local and global) spaces and thus invites translocal encounters.

The case of the Kiez demonstrates that resilience should be treated as a reaction to the experience of closure of a space that is meant to be principally open. The local neighbourhood is the last resort when larger societal spaces (for instance, spaces of work, of trade or of travel) have become inaccessible. Even a visit in another neighbourhood has to be justified, and remote places for travel are out of reach. Freedom of movement is indeed factually restricted to the local neighbourhood. At the same time the pandemic disrupts the relationship between the “space of places” (physical, local, territorialised) and the “space of flows” (digital, global, networked) which characterises modern urban life (Castells 2005). The space of places had already been undergoing a process of fragmentation, disconnecting physically proximate urban locales from one

another, and yet pandemic restrictions intensify this process of fragmentation by making travel outside the neighbourhood unit impossible in most cases. Meanwhile (as we have argued with respect to digital affordances already) simultaneous restrictions across the world forcing people to stay at home drive global increases in digital communication uses, and therefore an intensification of the space of flows as networked and deterritorialised. Finally, the routinised ways in which the space of flows is “folded into” (Castells 2005, 51) the space of places is again disrupted by new barriers to the use of public areas.

### **3. Practices of Resilience**

The ways digitalisation can support resilience through the activation of experimental modes of publicness varies widely depending on different needs to be satisfied in different areas of life. In the following, we select four areas where experimental modes of publicness develop in response to the enhanced uncertainty of the pandemic: political consumerism, neighbourhood solidarity, political mobilisation, and news consumption. In these areas we identify opportunities for citizens to maintain access to some version of public life in the crisis. And we observe shared practices of experimental coping using the potentials of digitalisation.

#### **3.1. Digital Communication and Political Consumerism**

At the same time as citizens experienced the closure of many public spaces, the crisis politicised economic life. Governments regulated businesses in extraordinary ways to achieve public health outcomes, causing precipitous drops in overall consumption. The consequences of these interventions, such as job losses and economic recession, also became the focus of intense public discussion. For our argument, however, we are more interested in how citizen participation in economic life during the pandemic was politicised in new and creative ways.

Even before the pandemic, political consumerism was one of the most common forms of political participation in many countries, enabling citizens to achieve political goals through consumer choices (Micheletti, Follesdal, and Stolle 2003). Research has distinguished between different varieties of political consumerism, and in particular between punishment-oriented boycotts and reward-oriented “buycotts,” which have

different strategic goals, normative orientations (Copeland 2014) and patterns of information consumption (Kelm and Dohle 2018). Varieties of political consumerism have already been related to broader strategies of resistance and resilience, such as the Greek responses to austerity (Lekakis 2017).

In the pandemic, there were plentiful grievances against corporate actors which acted as potential catalysts for resistance. For example, while a large majority of the US public believed companies should provide 14 days of paid sick leave, less than a third of the country's largest companies made such policy changes during the initial months of the crisis.<sup>1</sup> Yet the possibilities to stage resistance through boycotts faced new barriers. Primarily, uncertainty about the future of the economy made the calculation of punishment by consumers difficult. After all, when and how should citizens ostracise businesses in individual cases, when their governments were spending public money to prevent the failure of businesses in general? During the height of the pandemic, then, political consumption as resistance was to some degree suspended. One UK newspaper even explicitly referenced the deferral of this resistance with a list of “[t]he companies people are vowing to boycott after the coronavirus pandemic is over.”<sup>2</sup> During the height of the crisis political consumerism moved away from boycott and shifted its focus towards resilience and survival. This change had a material component - i.e. individuals changing their purchasing decisions - but more important here is its discursive component, where digital communications enable opinion formation about market practices.

The radical reduction in consumption prompted greater debate about consumption itself - what Stolle and Micheletti (2013) refer to as lifestyle political consumerism. News organisations reported on drastic improvements of air quality in major cities, and a Twitter post appearing to show swans returning to the unusually clear canals in Venice received almost one million likes, and helped to drive a (frequently ironic) viral meme trend around the phrase ‘Nature is healing. We are the virus.’ In part, then, resilience during the crisis involved a mode of experimental withdrawal from economic life: since people were being forced to limit their usual patterns of consumption anyway, they began imagining the potentialities of this kind of withdrawal in social and environmental terms.

1 <https://justcapital.com/reports/survey-what-americans-want-from-corporate-america-during-the-re-opening-reopening-and-reset-phases-of-the-coronavirus-crisis/>

2 <https://metro.co.uk/2020/03/26/companies-people-vowing-boycott-coronavirus-pandemic-12460345/>

When citizens did engage in active consumption, other forms of resilience were enabled through the adaptation of practices to the changed environment. In particular, local and small businesses gained new salience as the target of boycotts in direct response to threats to their survival, enabled by digital platforms such as Twitter hashtags specific to particular cities and regions. Platforms themselves adapted to increasing demand for this form of discursive political consumerism, such as the new Instagram sticker “Support Small Business” which then created an additional story comprised of all posts using the sticker across the user’s followed accounts. Instagram suggesting at the time that these kinds of digital affordances could be used to adapt to the loss in local public space, saying “many stores remain closed and social media serves as an online Main Street”.<sup>3</sup>

In other cases, resilience can be observed in the relocation of political consumerism to newly created digital spaces, often through bottom-up initiatives responding directly to the heightened risk. One example of this kind of bottom-up initiative is the website “Support Local or Else” (SLoE), which was created by local business owners in the US city of Charlotte, North Carolina. The SLoE website offers itself as an online directory where small businesses can advertise concrete ways for individuals to support them, such as buying gift cards to redeem after the pandemic restrictions are lifted. Importantly, the concrete boycotting acts are situated within a wider ranging discourse politicising the intersection between markets and urban life: the homepage states, “small businesses empower the creativity, passion and community that make our city thrive” and calls on people to “Do your part. Support local.” In this way small businesses which are usually connected by shared locality are instead relocated to newly created digital spaces, which cohere around the political significance of markets for urban life. It remains to be seen whether these kinds of initiatives exist only as short-term symbolic reactions to the pandemic, or if they hold the potential for more substantial transformations in consumerism. There are early indications, however, that experiments with resilience can support wider ranging action into the future. For example, the SLoE website initially focused solely on small businesses affected by the health crisis. After the murder of George Floyd by police officers in the US and the subsequent protests around racial injustice, the SLoE website then added a directory for Black-owned businesses. We can observe a discourse of political consumerism which began with a narrow focus on survival in response to the crisis, and yet naturally accommodated a more expansive politicisation of economic life as the crisis developed.

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3 <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/helping-people-and-businesses-find-their-online-main-street>



### 3.2. Resilience as Acts of Solidarity

The closure of offline spaces during the first weeks of the Covid pandemic created a need for solidarity with vulnerable groups, which were exposed to the high risks of health, social isolation or economic loss. At the same time, the inaccessibility of offline spaces became an obstacle for the mobilisation of solidarity action. Solidarity became one of the buzzwords in the Covid pandemic, yet, while solidarity traditionally implies a move to overcome social distance, its new meaning was associated with “social distancing”. This required the need to redefine and reinvent solidarity in online digital spaces. We can observe new modes of digital resilience being practised to mitigate the effects of the crisis, either through *adaptation* of existing practises, such as seen in the intensification in the use of existing digital platforms, or through the *relocation* of action to digital space, such as exemplified by the creation of new digital spaces for crisis-related needs. Digital resilience can also involve forms of *politicisation* when spaces beforehand used for private exchanges become more strongly related to forms of public claims-making and contestation about solidarity as a shared concern that requires common efforts among society at large.

One example of how such an intensification in platform use goes hand in hand with the politicisation of solidarity is *Nebenan.de*. Solidarity and neighbourly help in local areas have long been promoted through digital platforms that contribute to exchange (and maybe sometimes encounter publics) in physical space by enabling meetings in digital space. The platform, which started in 2015 in Germany and exists now also in France, Spain, and Italy, is a digital meeting place at the local level (with 1.4 million users in Germany) and connects primarily individuals (but also businesses and organisations) in a local neighbourhood. Members of a local community can get in contact with their neighbours via posting publicly, in sub-forums and groups, or by messaging other members individually. Before the Corona pandemic the platform was primarily a digital *space* of encounter, mutual support and private exchange, such as helping each other out through lending items.

With the Corona pandemic and the inaccessibility of public space we see an intensification in platform use that goes hand in hand with its politicization. Members on the platform and the platforms’ operators called for action to support the local neighbourhood. Neighbourhood concerns were thus exported and claimed to be “shared concerns” to be dealt with collectively. Neighbourhood solidarity against Corona became a public issue. This relates to individual support – people in search for help related to the pandemic could fill out a help request form – but also to organisations such as



local businesses. The platform initiated an appeal for donations via *Kaufnebenan.de*, where one can donate or buy a voucher for small businesses of one's own choice to support them in Corona times. This is an example of resilience of local publics who reappropriate an existing digital space in a more intense, more political, and less private form. At the same time, the platform connects back to offline communication as it established a phone hotline to be accessible for those most vulnerable who are not able to connect digitally during the pandemic. Thus, the turn to digital affordances in the immediate first phase of the pandemic is supplemented by offline communication, as digital communication can fall short of being inclusionary.

One example of relocation of action to the digital space is the platform *Unitedwest-ream.berlin*, a newly created public space that extends beyond the local. It has been initiated by a diverse set of actors (Club Commission, Reclaim Club Culture, Berlin Worx, in cooperation with rbb and ARTE concert) in March 2020 to help venues and artists affected by the lockdown. The platform streams a range of events such as music, discussion rounds and lectures, taking place in Berlin venues as well as in other cities such as Munich, Hamburg, Stuttgart, Vienna and Leipzig. The offers are free and accessible for everyone, but users are asked to donate to a rescue fund for event locations and for political purposes (Zivile Seenotrettung). While cultural spaces in general pertain more to private life, recreation and fun, they oftentimes also stand for the linkage between private concerns and the public matters. With the closure of those spaces, acts of solidarity evolved, which go beyond pure monetary support. Instead the question is addressed in which society – with which cultural institutions and offers – people would like to live in the future. Thus, caring for the survival of a cultural environment in the crisis becomes an act of civic intervention and the digital spaces created to support these actions fulfil a political function. However, it is uncertain to what extent those acts of resilience are sustainable in the medium and long run.

### **3.3. Resilience and Resistance through Political Mobilisation**

During the Covid pandemic the transition from (local) resilience to resistance goes hand in hand with the politicisation of public spaces. Public assemblies and street mobilisation for rallies, protests, and mass demonstrations belong to fundamental human rights and are prime examples how offline public spheres enable political participation and collective public opinion formation. The recent decade saw mass movements and demonstrations in many parts of the world, ranging from the transnational student

movement Fridays for Future to fight against climate change (Wahlström et al. 2019), demonstrations against EU migration policies (Seebrücke) in European countries, or massive pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. Although online social media provided an important information and coordination channel for all those collective actions, their main venue were the streets and physical places across the globe. All those mobilisations and public assemblies have come to an abrupt halt, with governments imposing legal mechanisms to slow down the pandemic's spread, including total prohibition of public assembling in the first acute phase of the crisis. Restrictions of the right to assemble in the subsequent phase were enforced by requirements of practicing physical distancing. Routines of mobilisation were not only disrupted by the strict limitations to mobilise on the streets and reduced opportunities to do so by, for example, face-to-face encounters (della Porta 2020). They were also held back by uncertainty, and concern about what the pandemic would mean for individual life and how opposing regulatory measures would put one's own health at risk. In this respect, the first acute phase of the crisis can be described as external shock, which seems to have almost completely stopped mobilisations at a first – short – point in time. Protest activities dramatically decreased across the world.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, after the immediate shock, experimental modes emerged which (1) respond to the crisis of the public sphere resulting from the imposed crisis regulations (blocked public spaces), and (2) react and oppose against the Corona pandemic narrative, framing and political actions as such. In the following two sections we discuss these two modes in terms of resilience and resistance.

*(1) Resilience through adaptation of practises and relocation to digital public spheres*

We can speak of resilience in those instances in which collective action does not target the pandemic issue as such, but responds to the Covid-changed environment and possibilities for mobilisation with adaptation of practices and relocation of pre-existing movements in space.

The pandemic has fostered the creative adaptation of those forms of activism which were less frequently used so far, and which ensured safety for the participants, such as car caravans or poster displaying actions on balconies. But action has primarily been relocated to digital public spheres or to hybrid variants of online and offline mobilisation. This relocation reacts to the closure of physical space in an innovative and experimental way. For example, the Fridays for Future movement which had used their website and social media channels before the crisis primarily for mobilisation and

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4 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/03/nonviolent-action-time-coronavirus>

information, relocated their demonstrations almost entirely online. Live-streaming-events were the main sphere of public action in the first strict period of the pandemic. Those digital spaces were accompanied by innovative forms of action, such as using the physical space around participants' home including their balcony, windows or their workplaces to locate signs or banners calling for climate change, or art actions and poster campaigns in front of relevant public buildings. These examples can be continued with regard to a number of protest movements that existed before the Corona pandemic, such as the international Seebrücke movement which fights for a different approach in Europe's migration policy, and which moved their actions as of the end of March 2020 to an interactive online demonstration.

As restrictions of access to public spaces are relaxed in the second phase of the pandemic, further experimentation is evident in the return to protests in physical space. Some physical protests have maintained social distancing between participants, creating striking visual images of evenly spaced grids of protesters. While this is certainly more logistically complex, it is also for that reason a novel way to stage at least three elements of what Tilly (2004) would term "WUNC displays" - showcasing the worthiness, unity and commitment of protesters.

In general, we observe that mobilisation in this later phase swings back from reliance on digital space to hybrid forms and increased relevance of public locations. Online demonstrations require considerable technical and financial effort of the organizers and might face difficulties and challenges in achieving large public attention. Thus, the public space gets reclaimed and action repertoires adapted as soon as Covid measures allow.

*(2) Resistance against the Corona pandemic narrative, framing and political actions*

A second type of action spurred by the crisis is resistance against the pandemic narrative and the actions imposed to fight the disease by governments across the world. Uncertainty is high in the Corona pandemic, reliable knowledge regarding best measures and their effects still being developed, and hard measures interfere strongly with individual fundamental rights. Resistance against governmental actions seems to have evolved only to a limited extent in the first acute phase of the crisis, but it has been increasing since the first shock was overcome. Governments across the globe in this second phase have to face demonstrations against lockdown measures and the crisis narrative as such.<sup>5</sup> Given the continued uncertainty, rumours and conspiracy theories are proliferating (Shahsavari et al. 2020; Cinelli et al. 2020) and pose significant thre-

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<sup>5</sup> <https://acleddata.com/analysis/covid-19-disorder-tracker/#1585775314361-2ee40e97-5aee>

ats to democratic institutions such as a free press but also to individual lives. Those acts of resistance, likewise, combine virtual protest with offline action forms which are adapted to the still restricted situation in innovative ways.

### **3.4. The Pandemic News Sphere**

A global pandemic also creates a global space for the manufacture of news, its, diffusion and consumption. The public sphere during the first stage of the pandemic has been a single issue public which focussed on Covid-19 almost entirely. Bad news in a situation of forced social isolation created undoubtedly unprecedented levels of distress at the individual level. What type of resilience can we expect with regard to emerging patterns of news consumption?

The first possibility is that enhanced news consumption during the pandemic would enable people to build resilience capacities. In facing the new uncertainty and risks of the pandemic, individuals are dependent on information and will, consequently, actively seek news. According to the “uses and gratification” paradigm news is accessed to decrease uncertainty, find orientation and give advice in situations that are experienced as stressful (Blumler and Katz 1974). Many news organisations have therefore increased efforts to provide reliable information and quality news that focus on explanation and advice. They satisfy the essential needs of individuals who are left alone (and often in isolation) with the pandemic and answer their questions about how to behave to remain healthy and to reduce risks. Furthermore, the immersion in the world of news can offer security in the form of community bonds, affiliation and shared destiny that are communicated through messages like “we are all sitting in the same boat”. This is important for conveying some sense of solidarity that resources will be shared, and that crisis will be mastered by holding together as a community.

Secondly, the principled ambivalence of news consumption needs to be acknowledged, which can help as well as hurt. We could expect therefore that withdrawal from news also manifests itself as a form of resilience. In many circumstances, news do not simply reduce uncertainty, they rather increase anxiety. The abundance of news, which in addition is monothematic and negative can create unprecedented levels of distress at the individual and collective level. Also, by watching news content, we will find that uncertainty is not necessarily reduced but also reintroduced because available knowledge proves insufficient, experts often contradict each other, and governmental decisi-

ons remain contested. This again might challenge trust in established news sources and in journalism, and increase fears about being misinformed by the news media.

As the pandemic unfolds, we expect that practices of resilience in news consumption develop over time with information needs satisfied especially in the initial phase and saturation achieved in later weeks or people even turning away from news altogether or embracing increasingly “alternative” news and mis- and disinformation agendas. News consumption went up especially during the first weeks of Corona with people turning primarily to unbiased sources from news organisations, governments or health organisations (Nielsen et al. 2020a). News are accessed from various platforms at the same time, with online sources (including social media) and television as the most popular ways of getting news (Nielsen et al. 2020a). In Germany, the most widespread channels of information are public broadcasters, through TV and their news apps. A majority of people visit news sources from public broadcasters several times a day, especially through the live feeds of news apps. News articles are frequently shared among friends by using various applications, such as WhatsApp and similar networks (Viehmann, Ziegele, and Quiring 2020). According to Frischlich et al. (2020), 97% of all Germans reported that they used at least one mainstream professional news source (TV, radio, print) a week, but only 12% used alternative news sources. This indicates for Germany that the risk of exposure to disinformation is reduced. Only the small minority of those who primarily used alternative news sources was exposed to a higher risk. The same study (Frischlich et al. 2020) shows that exposure to conspiracy headlines was low, but encounter with Covid-19 related distorted information was higher (36%). This confrontation obviously also increased their awareness of the risk of misinformation. Resilience becomes relevant here as practices of news readers to prevent confrontation with disinformation or prevent the spread of conspiracy theories.

While misinformation and disinformation are tied to communication in social networks and digital platforms in particular, quality journalism and public media have engaged in expert talk and science communication. Thus, one of the most visible group of actors in public information and debate are medical experts, virologists and epidemiologists who explain the nature of the pandemic and its consequences for public health. Often, they are cited as government advisors who lend credibility to the measures restraining public life. Every country comes up with such experts interpreting medical statistics and providing legitimisation to public policies responding to the crisis. Levels of trust in scientists is found to be consistently high in all European countries and the US and is frequently used as a resource of public information in the news but

also in entertainment formats such as talk shows.<sup>6</sup> During the first months of the pandemic, polls from different countries indicated that trust in scientific expertise was on the rise and that people were more likely to listen to expert advice in the media.<sup>7</sup> The debate among experts however also brings up new controversy and popularises scientific debate in the life sciences which opens up news space for dubious interpretation and misinterpretation.

Resilience practices regarding media consumption have been discussed in relation to mis- and disinformation. In this context, resilience means to build some sort of immunity against disinformation and to restore truth orientation in public debates. The literature distinguishes between “cognitive resilience” and “physical resilience” (Bjola and Papadakis 2020). The former relates to techniques for building adequate knowledge and literacy that allow individual media users to recognise falsehood in such a way that disinformation cannot take roots. Resilience would be a kind of vaccination against propaganda that makes potential receivers immune. This is combined with “physical resilience” which needs to be designed and implemented by providers in their hardware and software to filter out and stop the spread of disinformation, disrupting the network and disconnecting its nodes (Bjola and Papadakis 2020). These two forms of resilience are benchmarks for assessing the effectiveness of strategies against disinformation by governments.

Cognitive resilience, thus, is a way of enhancing cognitive capacities of individual media users and publics for reading news critically. Critical news reading goes beyond passive news consumption. It relates to modes of empowerment of news readers to handle distorted information in a competent manner (Frischlich et al. 2020). The common assumption is that news readers need to receive some sort of external support to become resilient against disinformation, for instance, the entry of media literacy in school curricula, or moderation on social media. While such external support is certainly urgently needed to help news readers to handle the potential dangers of disinformation, one should not underrate the capacities of individual news readers or reader communities to develop such resilience practices themselves.

As the pandemic continues, we witness increasing signs of the second form of resilience: the withdrawal from news. News audiences in some countries have become increasingly polarised in their assessment of whether news media provided reliable and critical coverage with respect to the crisis and crisis management (for UK: Niel-

6 [https://ec.europa.eu/research/innovation-union/pdf/competitiveness-report/2011/chapters/new\\_perspectives\\_smarter\\_policy\\_design\\_chapter\\_3.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/research/innovation-union/pdf/competitiveness-report/2011/chapters/new_perspectives_smarter_policy_design_chapter_3.pdf)

7 See the report of the Open Knowledge Foundation in the UK with fieldwork conducted on April 27-28, 200 ([https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Aicw6JyYsx\\_ydC6Ki\\_JTZyIapBk5zw56/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Aicw6JyYsx_ydC6Ki_JTZyIapBk5zw56/view))



sen, Kalogeropoulos, and Fletcher 2020b). Not only are differences in measures taken across countries difficult to understand first-hand, some audiences also blame news media for insufficient accuracy in their reporting (Cushion et al. 2020).

In the second stage of the pandemic the initial rise in news use flattened quickly, but again country differences matter regarding the degree to which people turn away from quality news. For Germany, the study of Viehmann et al. (2020) shows that the information use after the initial peak began to decline selectively. Meaning, that between week one and week three of the Corona lockdown, the news of public broadcasters and the press kept relatively stable audience rates while alternative news sources suffered from audience losses up to 7 percent. For the US, the picture is bleaker, as people increasingly turned away from Corona related news as the pandemic lasted (Benton 2020). According to the same study, US audiences also seem to be more vulnerable to misinformation and conspiracy news stories spread more easily. Similar findings are reported for the UK in a study by the Reuters Institute (Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher, and Nielsen 2020) according to which audiences feel increasingly stressed by bad Corona news and negative effects on their moods and, after an initial surge, start avoiding news again (Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher, and Nielsen 2020, n.p.).

## 4. Modes and Dynamics of Resilience

The discussion of various experimental modes of publicness in economic activities, social exchanges in the local realm, political mobilisation and news media consumption during the pandemic allows us to point to common features of resilience and reflect on their significance for overall public sphere dynamics. In all cases we find that the heightened uncertainty of the crisis provokes experimentation and innovation using digital affordances, which varies between the more specific modes of *adaptation* and *relocation*.

The first mode of resilience is the adaptation of existing practises and action forms themselves in their regular space, be they local or digital. Adaptation can take the form of intensification of existing practices or (temporary) withdrawal from them. We witnessed the strengthening of action repertoires in different areas of society, such as the intense use of digital platforms to demonstrate solidarity (3.2) or increasing news consumption to cope with crisis-induced insecurity (3.4). In the course of the crisis, we have also observed a countermovement to intensification in various social fields. At specific points in times, we observe the withdrawal from action, be it in form of

lifestyle consumerism (3.1) or the avoidance of information which became evident in later stages of the crisis (3.4). Another form of adaptation of action forms to the new circumstances of crisis was the creative use of forms of contentious action that comply with Corona-imposed measures (3.3). In all these instances, existing practices of communication and action - offline or online - are appropriated to crisis-related needs. This mode of resilience has the advantage that existing structures and routines of communication can be adapted and expanded, profiting from prior experiences and participation. This makes this mode of resilience easily accessible even in situations of increased uncertainty.

The second mode of resilience was the relocation of action to new spaces. This included the relocation of mobilisation action from offline places to digital spaces (3.3) and the entire creation of new digital spaces, be it for solidarity related actions (3.2) or with respect to consumer issues (3.1). This mode is more demanding, as the higher level of innovation requires higher resources and the viability and sustainability of new solutions to enabling publicness are less certain. Participation structures need to be developed beyond pre-existing structures. Available digital platforms, such as online news spaces (3.4) can be used for innovation but also bear the risk of deviation from established to “alternative news”.

Overall, resilience practices appear highly dynamic and context dependent on crisis-related and general public sphere structures. One important dynamic we observe is the politicisation of private and economic life: acts of solidarity and acts of consumerism are re-imagined as collective practises with the intent of building a sustainable and solidary community. As public spaces and familiar venues for public sphere dynamics become temporarily inaccessible, citizens seek to escape into the public through other means. They find new ways to politicise private spaces by making them an object of public discussion. This form of politicisation (Zürn 2014) which seems to be strongly linked to the crisis dynamic places emphasis on the intensified public salience of issues of collective concern. Thus, resilience in the form of politicisation emerges in the state and under the condition of emergency, while the longer-term consequences of these dynamics remain unclear after all.

Digital media foster and enable politicisation as resilience practices in moments when forms of actual resistance are not easily set into practice due to uncertainty and public sphere barriers. Such resilience is primarily oriented towards survival, and less towards systemic change. Resilience in this sense seems less innovative than at first glance. However, a turning point in these forms of politicisation is reached when resilience turns into resistance.



We have argued throughout this paper that resilience as it emerged in various practices of “survival” during the pandemic should not be understood as an alternative or as a substitute to resistance. A societal lockdown as experienced during the pandemic did temporarily ban protest from the streets, but might also lay the conditions for its resurgence. Resilience practices as we described them as experimental modes of publicness are linked to the expression of public concerns in various ways. Resilience is thus to be considered as a key mechanism of the emergence of a political public sphere and understood in the way it raises a public agenda. It is not private action, but civic action facilitated by rights and creative ways of “enacting citizenship” (Isin and Ruppert 2015). This means that usual distinctions drawn between resilience as private, as reactive, and as compliance compared with resistance as public, proactive and oppositional do not apply. Resilience is not necessarily restricted to restoration, but can be highly innovative. It creates solutions for society not only to survive, but to learn and to become more sustainable over time. Our findings therefore invite rethinking the relationship between resilience and resistance practices that are both constitutive to the public sphere and its dynamic transformation.

In the Covid-19 pandemic options of resistance were temporarily unavailable as street manifestations were banned during the lockdown and the mobilisation of political opposition was marginalised. Choices for political mobilisation were also encumbered by fear and a high degree of uncertainty. While resistance requires higher degrees of certainty, approved knowledge and common orientation, resilience is an experimental mode of public sphere functioning available also under conditions of uncertainty. Opting for resistance during the pandemic, e.g. in the form of political protest against the lockdown, would require investment in strategies for reducing uncertainty. As certainties were not readily available, protest risked becoming fed by “alternative facts”, selected proof and evidence that were turned into political propositions.

The transformative aspects of public sphere developments during the pandemic point to suspensions of public life and at the same time to experimental modes which were politicised over time - from tentative practices of resilience in the initial phase of the crisis to more overt forms of protest and resistance in later stages. The reopening of physical spaces brings an opportunity for this politicisation to support more expansive forms of contentious politics. As public spheres during the pandemic have become more contentious, also practices of resilience develop from the initial, more experimental phase to more established and sustainable solutions. Instead of considering resilience and resistance as linked to alternative repertoires of collective action, we should rather understand how they dynamically relate to each other and how partici-

pants interpret them as collective action with political meaning. Selective processes apply through which resilience practices are tested out, improved, developed further or given up again.

The Corona pandemic and the controversial measures taken to combat it have the potential to trigger major political unrest. This has to do with political restrictions of freedom and rights, and even more so with long-term negative economic consequences. Resistance is a question of timing. The community which holds together against the danger of the virus, risks falling apart again, once controversial measures are taken or simply when impatience increases. Such a transition from resilience to resistance can be observed in the surge of protest back into physical public spaces in the later stages of the crisis. Anti-lockdown protests were discredited presuming that protesters were victims of disinformation campaigns or conspiracy narratives, yet many of these protests were also driven by serious concerns with democracy and the state of law. Emergency measures are by default paternalistic and can be easily experienced as arbitrary or even as “tyranny of the virologist” or “Coronavirus dictatorship,” as this has been framed by the resistance movements. The circumstances for people to start mobilizing should therefore not be reduced to single factors but rather understood as part of the dynamic interplay between resilience and resistance. Political protest was also back in countries hit hardest by the pandemic occupying alternative agendas of social justice, such as the unrest which began in the US in response to the murder of George Floyd and spread internationally under the banner of Black Lives Matter. These protests spread transnationally through ties of solidarity expressed by protesters in cities as diverse as Berlin, Sydney and Sao Paulo. The experimental modes which characterised public sphere resilience during the intense initial phase of the pandemic - not just the politicisation of private spaces, but also the embeddedness within digital communication networks and the enhanced news consumption - all create the preconditions for a resurgence into physical public spaces.

This interrelation between the pandemic and subsequent waves of protest confirms our argument that resilience should not be viewed in isolation as a strategy of conservation of previously established patterns of public communication (bouncing back). Instead, we may consider resilience in a broader context with politicisation and resistance as an avenue for the transition of the public sphere (bouncing forward). In facing uncertainty induced by the Covid-19 pandemic, existing templates and normative role models for public sphere performance do not necessarily apply. By entering an experimental mode, the public sphere can become an open playground for questioning standard distinctions such as private and public, political and non-political or also local, natio-

nal and international. The context conditions for this to happen include digitalisation, which further accelerates the various patterns of new hybrid and fluid forms of publicness. However, the global health crisis has shown, that digital public spheres are vulnerable to short term changes in the environment and at the same time are subject to larger conditions of social change. This makes it highly dynamic and dissonant and produces unequal conditions of coping. On the one hand, digital publics can build on the previous experiences of some users who have been socialised within this new environment of hybrid media and fluid communication modes. On the other hand, the global health crisis takes place in a world of significant digital divides and social inequalities. Thus, survival in the pandemic but also the opportunity for the transition of the public sphere depends on the availability of digital media and the space therein for public experimentation.

## 5. Conclusion

Our study analysed the forms and dynamics of public sphere resilience and assessed the role of digitalisation and digital spaces in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We were able to show that the adaptation of existing practices and the relocation of actions into the digital space are recurring modes of resilience which can be observed across different sectors of society, such as the economy, civil society, and the media. We also showed that resilience practices are dynamic and context dependent, as spelled out with respect to the interplay between politicisation and depoliticisation, and between resilience and resistance. Our paper wishes to start the discussion of citizens' resilience as a neglected field of public sphere research. Among further aspects to address in subsequent research are questions of the diversity of actors engaged in resilience practices (who participates and who is left behind), the question of the scope of the emerging digital communication spaces in relation to a global pandemic, and the question to what extent and under which circumstances different modes of resilience and evolving practices contribute to the integrative and deliberative functions associated with public spheres.

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