COVID-19 from the Margins: Narrating the COVID-19 Pandemic Through Decoloniality and Multilinguism
Masiero, Silvia; Milan, Stefania; Treré, Emiliano

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Masiero, Silvia
University of Oslo
Oslo, Norway
silvima@ifi.uio.no

Milan, Stefania
University of Amsterdam
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
s.milan@uva.nl

Treré, Emiliano
Cardiff University
Cardiff, UK
treree@cardiff.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

Born as a multilingual blog in May 2020, *COVID-19 from the Margins* has offered a space for authors to voice the silenced narratives of the COVID-19 pandemic in any language chosen and representing multiple South(s) of the world (Milan & Treré, 2019). The blog became an open-access book in February 2021, and since then it has travelled across the globe to bring to light narratives of devoiced groups during COVID-19, generating debate on stories narrated by, amongst others, forced migrants, gig workers, ethnic minorities, people in economic poverty, and survivors of domestic violence. The project is divided into five sections—"Human Invisibilities and the Politics of Counting," "Perpetuated Vulnerabilities and Inequalities," "Datafied Social Policies," "Technological Reconfigurations in the Datafied Pandemic," and "Pandemic Solidarities and Resistance from Below"—which together contribute to the decolonial, multilingual project of narrating the COVID-19 pandemic through the voices of the systematically silenced. In this short paper, we reflect on the *COVID-19 from the Margins* experience and on its meaning towards a decolonial, multilingual narration of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1 INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is the first pandemic of the datafied society. Over the last two years and a half, public and governmental narratives of the pandemic have been centered on quantifying the impact of the virus, counting and measuring its effects through data made available in different forms. Statistics and tabulations have told the official stories of the pandemic, visualizing it and mapping its diffusion across countries and regions. Official statistics have become the hegemonic narrative of the pandemic, and the route through which pandemic narratives were reported on and displayed.

And yet, not all voices have been equally heard or represented. As much as it was a story of visualized statistics, COVID-19 holds invisible narratives: these come from the groups, communities and individuals subject, in various ways, to systematic silencing in public discourse. These narratives come from migrants, informal workers, economically poor people, ethnic minorities, workers of the gig economy, and survivors of domestic violence, who, in different parts of the world, suffered the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic without being given a voice in it. This reproduces dynamics of systemic silencing at the margins, conceptualized, following Rodríguez (2017), as "a shortcut to speak of complex dynamics of power inequality."

2 THE PROJECT

Against this backdrop, our project aims to voice the systematically silenced narratives of the COVID-19 pandemic. Programmatically titled *COVID-19 from the Margins*, the project has created a virtual space where such narratives have a voice, adopting a multilingual format that allows the writers to use the language(s) they prefer to express their voices. Multilingualism, seen as a route to escape the constraints of the use of English as a lingua franca in academic settings (Suzina, 2021), is integral to the voice-giving purpose of *COVID-19 from the Margins*, and has characterized the project since its inception. In *COVID-19 from the Margins*, multilingualism is, in addition, a route to a decolonial approach, understood following Escobar (2018) as an approach that unhooks the production of knowledge from predominantly Western science and paradigms. Multilingualism and decoloniality, intertwined and necessary for each other, are the two pillars on which our project has been founded (Milan et al., 2021).

The project started off in May 2020 as a blog, which invited writers to provide narrations of the datafied pandemic from the margins. It was conceived, again following Rodríguez (2017), beyond geographical and geopolitical borders. Rather than offering a dichotomic vision of the global North and South (Pansera, 2018), we embraced a vision of the world's South(s) as a plurality of loci of oppression and resistance, a pluralism recognized since the early work of Milan and Treré (2019).

Based on the blog, which attracted contributions from a plurality of Souths and a multitude of settings of pandemic invisibility, resistance, and solidarity, we created an open-access book, relying on 47 of the multilingual contributions submitted and published in the blog. Embracing multiple settings, forms of oppression and routes to resistance in the datafied pandemic, the book is articulated into five sections—"Human Invisibilities and the Politics of Counting," "Perpetuated Vulnerabilities and Inequalities," "Datafied Social Policies," "Technological Reconfigurations in the Datafied Pandemic," and "Pandemic Solidarities and Resistance from Below"—which, taken together, offer a comprehensive picture of silenced histories from the datafied pandemic.

3 THE BOOK'S SECTIONS

Each section in the book illuminates a part that is integral to the narration of COVID-19 from the margins. In Section 1, "Human Invisibilities and the Politics of Counting," people from communities that suffer from systematic exclusion from mainstream narratives voice their version of the pandemic's events. These narratives, which the team received from the early days of the blog, noted how disease surveillance in the pandemic determined invisibility, raising concerns about justice in population data management. Coming from multiple locations and experiences, these narratives found a common matrix in problematizations of data justice, meant, following Taylor (2017, p. 1), as "fairness in the way people are made visible, represented and treated as a result of their production of digital data". In fact, multiple narratives in this section offer proper instantiations of data injustice, which acquires at least three forms according to Masiero and Das (2019):

- Legal injustice, when universal rights (e.g., to food and shelter) are made conditional on datafication, for example by enrollment in biometric databases;
- Informational injustice, where inaccurate or incomplete information is given to people about the way their data is used or will be used;
- Design-related injustice, where artefacts, for example contact tracing apps, are designed in such a way to produce harm in the individual (Costanza-Chock, 2020).

In Section 2, "Perpetuated Vulnerabilities and Inequalities," authors examine the crystallization of previous forms of inequality and vulnerability and the production of new ones in datafied forms during the pandemic. In one of the chapters, it is noted that, as "staying at home" became the new normal during the pandemic, LGBTQ+ communities, suffering ingrained social prejudice, may not have had a home to stay in. Several contributions, focusing on work in the gig economy, noted how gig workers were constantly at the forefront of risk in the pandemic while at the same time suffering the same perpetuated subalternity and subjection to the "rating economy" experienced before (Anwar

& Graham, 2021). As a whole, the section notes how pandemic technologies reified and reinforced existing subalternities, generating new inequalities on top of existing ones.

In Section 3, "Datafied Social Policies", authors explore multiple instances of social policies adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sections contain, on the one hand, multiple instantiations of informational injustice as defined in Masiero and Das (2019): these pertain to the opaque cross-checking of citizen data across databases such as land registries, property, and population datasets, making the assignation of subsidies extremely uncertain and experimental (Cerna Aragon, 2021; López, 2021). On the other hand, the section illuminates the issue residing in the conditionality of essential social provision to digital authentication, which, where it fails, leaves needful users exposed to stark magnifications of the pandemic's risks. The section illuminates, overall, the risks associated with the datafication of social protection in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrating regularities across countries and reflecting on how such issues can be overcome.

In Section 4, "Technological Reconfigurations in the Datafied Pandemic," the focus shifts on how existing technologies have been repurposed during COVID-19. Contributions show how existing social media platforms have afforded new forms of collective action, while new safeguards have been added to data policies due to the vulnerability of communities to unfair data treatment. This problem, as the contributions of Das (2021) and Raghunath (2021) note, was exacerbated in those contexts where contact tracing apps were implemented without an adequate data protection framework, requiring a reconfiguration of existing data protection structures. Open data has been proposed as a route to overcome the issue and acts as a route to liberation from situations of outright pandemic negationism and oppression (Fussy, 2021).

In this spirit, the last section, "Pandemic Solidarities and Resistance from Below", illuminates new, datafied forms of solidarity and resistance that emerged, across countries and contexts, during COVID-19. Digital platforms, as a relatively new actor in the landscape of solidarity-making, acquired an important role as sites of contestation and also organization of solidarity across groups. Novel practices, such as citizen sensing, have raised important questions about how existing logics of resistance can be rapidly reorganized in emergency situations. Ending the book on a note of hope, the final section illuminates how technology can be reappraised against oppression, to engage the very practices of silencing that the whole project was designed to respond to.

4   A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

In its entirety, the *COVID-19 from the Margins* project is a whole that transcends its outputs (the blog; the book; its presentations) and seeks to initiate a movement that views the pandemic from the

world's multiple South(s), in line with the *Big Data from the South* project launched by Milan and Treré (2019). As a result, the project seeks to travel between the physical and virtual world to interact with new communities and audiences, breaking the barriers of traditional academic discourse and engaging domains of practice, activism, and civil society. This is what led us to propose the project for presentation in an interactive, academic-artistic forum like the Weizenbaum Conference, where we seek to build further interaction in our multilingual and decolonial venture. We believe that the transdisciplinary platform offered by the conference, by virtue its interactivity and cross-disciplinarity, can be the basis to further grow in terms of the activist potential that the project can generate.

Among the conference tracks, we saw the project contributing to the track on Datafication and Democracy as its themes—in terms of the politics of data, with its implications for counting and surveillance capitalism—overlapped directly with stories featured in the book. We believe that bringing *COVID-19 from the Margins* to track 2 of the conference has been the start of an important conversation, leading to further abating of the barriers that silence particular communities and further building of the power of cross-disciplinarity in telling the silenced stories of the datafied pandemic.

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