



PROJECT MUSE®

The Pandemic Clears Media Pollution and Queers the Ecosystem

Aymar Jean Christian

QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking, Volume 7, Number 3, Fall 2020, pp. 135-140 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/781366>



The Pandemic Clears Media Pollution and Queers the Ecosystem

Aymar Jean Christian

The virus spreads. Cities shut down. But nature rejoices. Carbon emissions fall as fast as the price of gas. Pollution disperses, clearing the air. Supply chains shut down, prompting calls to diversify how we cultivate our food and land.

The pandemic reshapes the US media environment, too. Media expands rapidly and organically. Like the virus, media spreads in close quarters, person-to-person, and deepening its hold with every moment of co-presence. Traffic on open-access platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, and TikTok sharply increase within weeks as artists and entertainers broadcast live from home and, newly unemployed, spend hours crafting tightly scripted short videos to communicate joy, trauma, and wellness strategies.

Corporate TV contracts. Production on nearly all narrative media halts. Late night shows cut staff and live audiences, with hosts filming from iPhones. The rapid capitalist churn of constant production, the fast-food nature of “peak TV,” slows. Instead, we entertain ourselves. Far from Neil Postman’s dystopic ecological view of passive TV consumption at the height of its representational power, we become active as we burrow digital space for entertainment and information while we connect with loved ones on FaceTime and community on Zoom.

Media expands from the roots, drawing joy and pain. Queer communities’ experience an abrupt, perhaps temporary, shift away from what Kristen Warner called “plastic representation,” where corporations cheaply package and globally distribute identities and stories as commodities, to something more organic, local, diverse, and, perhaps, sustainable.² Artists and communities instinctually tap in to intimate and subversive media histories, especially of TV and video,

such as public access and public affairs, experimental music television, alternative video art, home movies, and local station programming. White supremacists and other defenders of hegemonic history encounter a similar environment but one more polluted with lies manufactured as memes or propaganda packaged as news entertainment.

Let's focus on the liberatory clearing of US corporate media pollution in the first months of the pandemic.

Pandemic queer media draws organically from whatever resources are available in small, discreet locations. Queers know something about making something from nothing. Drag queens storm Twitch in the wake of bar and club closings. I count 27 new Twitch channels in the first four months of the pandemic, from Black-focused shows by The Vixen (*Black Girl Magic*) and Bambi Banks-Couleé (*Unfriendly Black Hotties*), to the queer punk acid trips *ToxicWasteFace* and *Lucifer's Slutty Dogs*. We are invited into their homes, augmented with makeshift lighting, projectors, green screens, and fabric backdrops dripping in sequins. Big city artists have less space but more connections to producers and editors. Rural queens gain the upper hand in production design: the outdoors as canvas. San Francisco, long forgotten as the hub of avant-drag, becomes the eye of the storm with *DragAlive's* weekly show benefitting The Stud bar and Biqrch Puddin's three-hour weekly gender- and style-inclusive bonanza, featuring *Dragula* and *Drag Race* alums, drag kings, and newcomers from around the world.

Organic media production is more lo-fi, grounded and durational, recalling the golden age of public access.³ Millions watch some of the greatest music artists alive—most of them Black—play music on Instagram Live (@verzuz), streaming from phones with the lowest quality audio of their careers but still giving life to fans. Experimental Sound Studio streams regularly on Twitch, allowing sound artists to experiment with video. Chicago artists Damon Locks, Tomeka Reid, Nicole Mitchell, and Jeff Parker improvise a discordant tapestry of sound and video, imploring us to *Keep Your Mind Free*, transporting us to another dimension. If the music you desire is the cacophony of revolution, switch Twitch channels to *Woke*, a livestream of protests from around the world.

The spirit of being with each other, remotely, increases the power of the local, as long-distance travel grinds to a halt. On the precipice of summer and the promise of outdoor activities, Black people are killed, threatened and brutalized by police and vigilantes in cities across America—George Floyd, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, Dominique Rem'mie Fells, Ahmaud Arbery, Nina Pop, and so many others. We are used to there being too many names to name. Now we have time. Nothing else to do and nowhere to go but to say them publicly. In cities and towns across the United States and the world, thousands flock to the streets for weeks to demand justice. We find out about marches on social media, and

we leave our screens. If we bring them, we share our communities, not ourselves. Your friends broadcast not from vacation or brunch, but from the protest, summer 2020's must-do social activity. (Keep your phone in airplane mode; cops are surveilling.) For a moment, and seemingly the first time, social media's self-branding impulse shifts in a major way. Selena Gomez, with over 60 million Instagram followers, gives over her feed to Black feminists like Kimberlé Crenshaw and Racquel Willis, activist performers like Killer Mike and Kendrick Sampson, the latter of which spent weeks on the streets of Los Angeles giving speeches as police shot him with rubber bullets.

In Chicago, local artists and activists respond rapidly. I am faced with our unique reputation as the biggest city with the largest per capita police force and seemingly the most police-friendly mayor. One of my OTV | Open Television collaborators, Jenna Anast, organizes a press conference outside of a jail, recruiting *Pose* star Indya Moore and local collectives to demand the release of activists imprisoned on bogus charges. Ricardo Gamboa, creator of OTV's *Brujos*, uses Zoom to revive their talk show, *The Hoodoisie*, interviewing city and state officials and local activists on everything from housing reform to Black-and-Brown relations, the latter a response to police sanctioned anti-Black violence in Chicago's Latinx neighborhoods that kept Jenna from her home for more than a week.⁴ Thousands of Chicagoans watch *The Hoodoisie* live on Facebook to see their local leaders discuss policy from their homes—no fancy lighting or sound, just facts, tactics, and strategies for liberation. Meanwhile Mayor Lori Lightfoot closes food banks in schools while proposing modest reforms and refusing to fire cops caught on camera fomenting violence. The mayor barricades the gentrified city center on the first day of protest, trapping young activists downtown and pushing crowds to Black and Brown neighborhoods to the south and west, which see increased looting and property damage. Corporate media frames this as violence, because they value property over Black people. (I attend the beginning of the protests and ironically only see non-Black people destroying property.)

I learn what's happening and how to resist on social media, through friends in Chicago. I pull away from corporate television. For weeks I struggle to watch it. What is *Tiger King*'s struggle compared to the struggles of my Black friends evicted from apartments but unable to leave because of state-sanctioned violence happening on their block? Netflix, Apple, and Amazon release "Black Lives Matter" playlists replete with trauma porn and white-savior movies amid a sprinkling of vital documentaries like *The 13th* and *Who Killed Malcolm X* (regrettably, *The Help* is the number one film on Netflix for a time). The escapist colonial fantasies I binged preuprising, *The Great* and *Belgravia*, feel hollow amid the substantive drama online and outside my door: the boarded-up businesses graffitied

with Black Lives Matter and Breonna Taylor; the reports I read on Instagram of white supremacist Proud Boys targeting Black people in north side neighborhoods; the actions, letters, and tweets accusing local white theaters, venues, and community leaders of harm and discrimination, leading to resignations; the constant stream of sharply written tweets and well-designed photos promoting strategies for defunding the police and supporting community organizations.

The pandemic expands media's ecological diversity, if only briefly. We start to see diversity not as a corporate communications tool but an ever-evolving practice of nurturing equity as essential to environmental sustainability. The uprising increases demand for Black intellectual leadership. Most Black scholars, activists, and community leaders, including myself, receive more media requests, donations to their nonprofits, and top billing on everything from online drag shows to late-night talk shows. History echoes, in particular 1968 to 1970, which saw both the birth of Black public affairs TV after the urban uprisings following the assassination of Dr. King⁵ and the birth of queer politics, with Stonewall and resulting actions led by transwomen of color, whose deaths rally thousands of people in Black-led protests in Brooklyn and Chicago 50 years later. As I plot ways to bring public affairs to OTV, my executive director plans a three-day virtual Pride fest featuring an all-Black line-up.

Rejecting corporate TV, my tastes diversify. On sabbatical, I am watching more independent and foreign films than I have since the less scheduled days of grad school, as film festivals and cinemas provide more robust online offerings—Juliano Dornelles and Kleber Mendonça Filho's *Bacarau* (2020), chronicling an intersectional indigenous uprising in rural Brazil, quenches my thirst for fantasy. Movies such as these don't always make it to Chicago and, when they do, often have short runs.

My YouTube viewing consumption broadens. I start watching video game narratives, still too lazy to play but eager to improve my teaching on the topic. The queer revolutionary spirit of the *Final Fantasy VII* remake, the epic indigenous quest *Never Alone*, and the silent postapocalyptic spiritual saga *Journey* draw me in with 2- to 15-hour narratives edited together by YouTube game-players, underrecognized grassroots innovators of entirely new media forms.⁶ I watch hours of interviews with economists like Nouriel “Dr. Doom” Roubini and Ray Dalio to understand how central banks and markets will respond to the global pause on capitalism. For balance I watch 1970s Black public affairs TV on the AfroMarxist channel.⁷ One of the best TV moments of my shelter in place is an episode of *Black Journal* featuring Black leaders, including Angela Davis and Kwame Ture (then Stokely Carmichael), during which a caller has to pay \$1 to finish his question: he called collect, much to the amusement of Ture and Davis, who stridently critiqued capitalism in a discussion dominated by

Black capitalists. “In Cuba, calls are free!” Ture says. The payoff is the question itself, barely audible. Our host summarizes the question, referencing Dr. Frances Welsing’s *Isis Papers*: “whites do not hate Blacks because Blacks are Black; whites hate Blacks because whites are not Black.” If only Dr. Welsing had lived to see TikTok.⁸

Uncertain of the future, we only have questions in these early days of the pandemic. For how long will the virus spread? Will the contagion of disinformation infect our social bonds? Is this new media ecology fertile terrain for a resurgent class consciousness and Black solidarity? Can we organize digitally, on Zoom and on social media?

Is any of this sustainable? The pandemic reshapes our relationship to government overnight. Advocating for more benefits, stronger labor protections, better workplace safety and other services, rapidly normalizes. In increasingly unequal Hollywood, the pandemic halts talks of strikes from unions and guilds but prompts proposals from studios and workers alike to make production more safe and secure.⁹ Most new guidelines render big-budget franchise movies and TV shows more costly and less safe, implicitly guiding studios to smaller, human-centered films outside of city centers with small casts.¹⁰ Amid weeks of uprising, the film Academy diversifies its board, and Black writers in the WGA demand more ownership over their stories, offering glimmers of hope of a more equitable and sustainable creative economy.¹¹

When we turn off our screens, we face a mirror and an important question: what kind of media ecosystem do we want? In a few months we saw a new media ecology emerge, one centered on artists and communities organically producing what they can, with what they have, wherever they are. We saw slivers of an alternative media system, guided not by corporations, but by each other. Our demands for high production value cannot be met, so we make do with what we have. We leverage platforms to see our loved ones, support our communities, and organize for our liberation.

The virus is deadly, and no one can escape infection, not even the media system. Confined at home yet digitally connected, we queerly spread a new way of being, thinking, and perceiving, as nature takes over.

NOTES

1. Here I draw from queer theory that identifies queer relations as intertwined with race, gender, class, and other intersections, most recently Kara Keeling and C. Riley Snorton. Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019); C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

2. Kristen J. Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (Winter 2017), 32–37; Aymar Jean Christian and Khadijah White, "Organic Representation as Cultural Reparation," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* (forthcoming).
3. Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerilla Television Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, community, and alternative video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).
4. Matt Harvey, "In Response to Attacks by Latinx Gangs, Black and Brown people Are Uniting to Protect Black lives," *The Triibe*, June 3, 2020, accessed September 28, 2020, <https://thetriibe.com/2020/06/in-response-to-attacks-by-latinx-gangs-black-and-brown-people-are-uniting-to-protect-black-lives>.
5. Devorah Heitner, *Black Power TV* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Gayle Wald, *It's Been Beautiful: Soul! and Black Power Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
6. Hector Postigo, "The Socio-Technical Architecture of Digital Labor: Converting Play into YouTube Money," *New Media and Society* 18, no. 2 (2016): 332–49; T. L. Taylor, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).
7. For more on this historical moment, see Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
8. Much was made of anti-Trump activism on TikTok during the uprisings but previously the platform's most popular creators were white people who leveraged Black culture for likes, see Brianna Holt, "Teens on TikTok Have No Clue They're Perpetuating Racist Stereotypes," *Quartz*, November 1, 2019, accessed September 28, 2020, <https://qz.com/quartz/1738478/how-teens-on-tiktok-are-perpetuating-racist-stereotypes>.
9. Brian Welk, "Hollywood Unions Release COVID-19 Safety Guidelines for Film, TV Production," *The Wrap*, June 12, 2020, accessed September 28, 2020, <https://www.thewrap.com/hollywood-unions-release-covid-19-safety-guidelines-for-film-and-tv-production>.
10. Kate Arthur, "New Document Lays Out Plan to Resume Movie and TV Productions With Strict Quarantine Pods (EXCLUSIVE)," *Variety*, April 24, 2020, accessed September 28, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/biz/news/production-plan-coronavirus-1234589286/?fbclid=IwAR1ffDyBY1JmiKigbmC3E5I-l4pBpgv2luMl_TwaU-T7E28fvFiRz4IOVeA.
11. Anousha Sakoui, "Black Writers Call for Accountability, Revamped Hiring in Open Letter to Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 2020, accessed September 28, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2020-06-12/black-writers-wga-film-tv-open-letter-to-hollywood>.

)))

Aymar Jean (“AJ”) Christian is an associate professor of communication studies at Northwestern University. His first book, *Open TV: Innovation Beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television*, published by New York University Press, argues the web brought innovation to television by opening development to independent producers. His work has been published in numerous academic journals, including the *International Journal of Communication*, *Television & New Media*, *Social Media & Society*, *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, *Continuum*, and *Transformative Works and Cultures*.