

## **Graduate Students' Exploration of Opportunities in a Crisis: a White Paper**

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### **Abstract**

The following white paper details the University of Calgary's 2021 graduate student conference titled, 'Opportunities in a Crisis.' This white paper works to describe how graduate students explored the terms 'opportunities' and 'crisis' within their research interests. These research interests were interdisciplinary to various fields such as telecommunications policy, algorithmic studies, critical race theory, and video game studies to list a few. Through this conference, we observed an acute awareness of the ways in which the COVID-19 crisis has impacted research in media activism, feminist media studies, internet infrastructure, and teaching and learning, to mention a handful. This white paper is divided by panel sections, thereby allowing readers to connect with this graduate student conference and help inform future research on topics in communication and media studies, as they are framed in working through these crisis moments in our global history. Our white paper set out to achieve two goals: first, document the presentations and emerging scholarly work of graduate students; and second, reflect on how research can, and very well does, pivot in times of crises, specifically using our current global COVID-19 pandemic as an ongoing, lived experience. This white paper achieves these goals which we believe helps in the preservation of this unique moment in time to be a graduate student.

### **Keywords**

Opportunities; Crisis; Graduate students; White Paper; Calgary.

In 2020, graduate students at the University of Calgary came together to plan what would be their department's (Communication, Media and Film/CMF) first virtual conference. Immediately, the student organizers asked questions of how to capture the moment they were living in (online work and learning due to the COVID-19 global pandemic) while preventing a conference solely dedicated to analyzing the effects of the pandemic on emerging scholarship. To answer this, the organizers learned how the Chinese symbol for the word 'crisis' being a mixture of the words 'danger' and 'opportunity.' It was here the theme of the annual University of Calgary CMF graduate student conference was decided: Opportunities in a Crisis.

This white paper serves to document and reflect on the research which was presented from May 11th to 13th, 2021. The white paper has been divided into seven student sections from the week's various panels. The authors of this white paper were active in attending all panels and followed up with a handful of presenters for clarification on their presentations to ensure accuracy in this recorded account. Through the crisis of a virtual conference setting in missed networking opportunities, we hope this white paper serves as documentation of the impact graduate students made in the conversation of their research conducted during the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Media & Memory**

Document, experience, and memorize; these words guided the Media and Memory panel discussions, in which presenters asked questions of social, cultural and historical relevance through the lens of Indigenous, feminist and archaeological studies. The works sought to critically look at representations—artifacts, photographs, and film—in order to challenge traditional patterns of framing the memory of a group or an event. The authors focused on bringing to the discussion aesthetic, ethical and human issues, which not only pointed to the problems in the representation and conservation of memory, but also to new opportunities in times of crisis. Thus, our presenters conducted the talk on three main fronts: preservation and historical value in the McDougall Memorial Church case (Thomas), self-representation of the refugee's women memories (Zanco), and sound experience in Indigenous uprising films (Gonzalés).

The first presenter, Drew Thomas, explored the tragic historical, social and cultural event—the 2017 burning of the McDougall Memorial Church, by focusing specifically on historical value of the preservation and destruction of artifacts, and its implication to archeology. McDougall Memorial Church was considered a protected historic resource, having been founded on the site of the first European settlement in the area. Thomas questioned the judgment of values in relation to the cultural value

of historic places, stating that this judgment goes against current heritage management practices, where places are judged largely by the presence and number of artifacts. Thus, through a detailed discourse analysis of the Human Resource Institute of Alberta (HRIA) reports and small number of interviews with local archeologists, Thomas focused on how these documents build historical value and how local professionals capture the impressions of those using the HRIA system. Thomas concluded that “categorizing and recording the value of a site like the McDougall Memorial Church did not result in its protection from the fire that consumed it, but recording it within a colonial physical frame, did create a perception of value that carries over after the fire” (Thomas). In other words, Thomas concluded that value in the HRIA system is created from criteria that are based on a colonial perspective of occupation based on an established reality of materials. For the presenter, measures taken to correct documentation inequalities will now have lasting effects on what is known and shared about heritage. Given this context, Thomas highlighted the challenge that Alberta faces in maintaining the integrity of the HRIA rating system and identifies trends that point to the need to overhaul the system to support the protection of Alberta’s historic resources more accurately and effectively. Thus, the presenter ended his presentation warning the need of communication scholars to pay special attention to the crisis of erasure of historical value.

Expanding beyond the crisis of historical values, we came across the discussion raised by the second presenter, Amanda Zanco, who brought a theme that transpires the term crisis in all its different facets. The presentation reflected on how self-representation of refugee women through amateur photography can help in the construction of their identities and exiled memories by using new media as a platform for activism and recognition of daily struggles. These women are victims of a global refugee crisis resulting from a combination of different factors (armed conflict, natural disaster, diseases, etc.), additionally, they also face subjective crises in lands that they now call home. Given this scenario, Zanco began the presentation by stating that the aim of the research—which is still in construction—is to reflect on photographic practices outside of mainstream media. For this, Zanco first presented a literature review of the state of humanitarian photography, which was divided into: (1) photographing distant suffering, (2) looking beyond the violent scenes, and (3) framing refugee memories. This literature review had the purpose of deromanticizing the humanitarian photography’s term and questioning the ethical and human limits in representing the pain of the other. The presenter raised questions about compassion fatigue, witnessing of distant suffering, and political and social issues surrounding an activist representation of refugee memory. Thus, based on a critical reading of humanitarian photographic practice, Zanco proposes for her ongoing research the use of participatory photography, a creative method that enables the self-representation

of refugee women through amateur photographic practices. Zanco's main intention is to treat refugee women as active participants in the research process. That is, these women will translate their perceptions to a world photographically framed; these women will visually frame their memories by their own eyes. The amateur photographs will be posted on a Digital Platform to give visibility to the visual narratives of the refugee women participating in the research in order to expand the production of knowledge and broaden the discussion on the activist representation of refugee memory beyond academia.

Following the same lines of mnemonically framing the history of a group, the last presentation led us to a reflection on how sound works to build truth claims and aesthetic experiences in documentaries about Indigenous uprisings during the 1990s. Berenice González began her presentation by raising an important question regarding the efforts of nonfiction films in construct statements about reality through direct and synchronous indicial sound. However, the presenter said that despite providing an aura of realism, these film narratives do not leave aside the expressive, subjective and emotional auditory dimension. Thus, non-fiction films use the sound artifice to construct the truth and provide the viewer with an aesthetic experience of subjectivity. González highlighted documentaries of official historical accounts that represent struggles, crises and revolutions, for which she focuses on two films within the North American context: *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (Obomsawin, 1993) and *A Place Called Chiapas* (Wild, 1998). Both films, according to the presenter despite their auditory realism, reveal affective and cultural representations. Therefore, through a critical and detailed reading of the sound aspects, González's ongoing work shows the aesthetic experience as a fundamental part of the construction of the filmic narrative insofar as it articulates and crystallizes the Indigenous memory.

Given this brief exposition of the Media and Memory panel's enriching presentations, it is possible to notice the importance of a critical analysis of memory representation in its different form, whether in the artifacts of a memorial, refugee memory in photographs or sound artifacts of non-fiction Indigenous documented accounts. The presenters were asked to reflect on the role of memory within their own work: What role does memory play in each presenter's research? How do you think about memory within critical media and communication scholarship? What is the social relevance in bringing the issue of memory up for discussion? The answers were interesting and related to the theoretical context of each research. However, we can draw as a conclusion to this brilliant panel that it is necessary to reflect on mnemonic representations, especially the role of memory in times of crisis, as by looking back to the past, we can understand our present and orient our future towards new activist representations and communicational opportunities fairer, more ethical, and humane.

## Mediated Activisms

Amidst a complex social moment with the increased visibility of Black, queer, and feminist activist movements facilitated by digital media platforms, the CMF Graduate Student Conference panel “Mediated Activisms” offered insight into the various ways users engage in social activism using digital media. In considering how the intersecting identities of media users shape their activist practices, the panellists explored three seemingly disparate case studies – Taylor Swift’s fandom (Swifties), Nintendo’s *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and Netflix’s *Patriot Act* by Hasan Minhaj.

The provocations from this panel are foregrounded by a broader scholarly conversation across disciplines about the meaning of activism in our current media moment, seeking to answer questions such as: What does activism look like? What counts as activism? What opportunities does digital activism offer? And finally, who does it serve? This important conversation about digital media platforms as opportune spaces for activism is especially pertinent given the COVID-19 pandemic which required immaterial forms of activism as in-person events were more difficult to facilitate. All three presenters addressed how digital media afford affective connections between activists and their intended audiences, positioning their activisms as active processes that shape how the users conceptualize the material world around them.

Doctoral student Victoria Sands proposed that the predominantly girls and young women who make up Taylor Swift’s fandom engage in a kind of “emotional activism.” Following Taylor Swift’s 2017 album, *reputation*, the fandom attempted to recuperate what was described by the media as a moment of crisis for the artist. Fans took to social media platforms to defend Swift, imaging their digital emotional labour to be a part of a larger feminist project. Sands proposes that the fandom conceptualize their labour as a part of a feminist collective movement. By defending Swift, they are taking a stand against the misogyny that undergirds social life. Within this context, their practices are not just about Swift herself, but instead a larger feminist project of dismantling the patriarchy.

Because the activism does important discursive work for a corporate entity (in this case Swift), it has the potential to be exploitative. In the case of Swift’s fandom, the feminized emotional labour was mobilized in particular ways to help mediate Swift’s star image which according to the fans, was in crisis. The fans “go to work” for Swift, coordinating their spending power and social media savvy to ensure Swift’s success — a supposed win for feminism in a misogynist culture (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This research offered important insight into how girls and young women conceptualize feminist interventions. Furthermore, Sands’ argument opens the opportunity for

further discussion of the discursive work fandoms (and users) do for media producers, particularly as it relates to framing the politics of powerful corporations. For Swift, the fandoms labour is beneficial to the reconfiguring of a celebrity persona that was no longer serving her, helping usher in a new era of Swift's star image as a feminist. The blurring of the fandom's politics with Swift's politics as the media producer shares a strong connection with Sam Stockton's work, which considers how players of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* subvert the Nintendo company's intentions for the digital game.

Released in March 2020, just days before worldwide COVID-19 shutdowns, Nintendo's life simulation game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* offered a digital space for socializing. Users design unique islands which are then populated by non-player characters. Invitations to their islands can be extended to other *Animal Crossing* players, with the intention of trading items and showing off their décor. While much of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement took place in person, Black and LGBTQ2S+ activists also made use of *Animal Crossings'* island visit function to engage in immaterial activism. Users hosted in-game demonstrations, information sessions, and traded customized in-game LGBTQ2S+ Pride furniture and clothing. This immaterial activism focused on queer and trans-BIPOC, decentralizing whiteness from both Pride and BLM.

*Animal Crossing* only allows players to host a certain number of visitors. To circumvent this, players took to streaming their islands on Twitch, raising money for BLM through the streaming platform's fundraising function, and allowing the in-game activism to be more widely distributed (Schofield, 2020). The affordances of *Animal Crossing's* game design and Nintendo's corporate prerogatives shape the kinds of activism made possible through the platform. Yet, it is the subverting of the intended use of the game in which media studies scholars should be interested, as users respond to media and negotiate digital platforms in novel ways.

The question of engaging media platforms was further explored in Hafsa Masood's work. In exploring the political comedy show *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj*, Masood argued that comedy is a powerful mechanism through which marginalized communities can speak back. Using Netflix as a platform, Minhaj explores his identity as a Muslim Indian American using comedy to decentre whiteness and offer counter-narratives to Islamophobic western stereotypes. In a North American society where Islamophobic sentiments are pervasive, *Patriot Act* provides new ways to think about the lived experiences of marginalized people. Masood's work extends beyond a textual analysis of *Patriot Act*, using critical discourse analysis to consider audience reception data from YouTube comment sections. While *Patriot Act* was

cancelled after two seasons, it is archived both on Netflix and YouTube. The Netflix special was uploaded to the video-sharing platform, allowing for an even larger audience. The platform also afforded a new space in which discourses could be negotiated and reinforced. In considering these comments, Maqsood demonstrated both the opportunity of comedy as a mechanism for activism and the complexities of comment sections as spaces in which lived experiences are negotiated.

As Stockton reminded us during their presentation, while these forms of activism might feel new and novel, they are rooted in deep histories. Digital platforms with increasingly complex affordances offer new ways to think about doing activism, but marginalized communities have been engaging in digital activism for decades. For example, during the AIDS crisis, the queer community turned to the early non-centralized network USENET to share covert information. For media studies scholars, further lines of inquiry open when we explore the evolution of how communities engage with media platforms while paying particular attention to the corporations who ultimately control digital media platforms. Our opening keynote speaker, Dr. Alex Cho, argued that while current popular media platforms are designed and experienced through the mechanics of empire, social media does not need to be designed this way. Instead, as we think about the future of sociality on platforms, particularly the experiences of marginalized groups, we can recognize the possibilities offered by platforms in their current iterations. At the same time, we can imagine alternatives digital spaces whose designs rethink the mechanics of empire extending opportunities to marginalized voices.

### **Tracing the Colonialist Space**

The second day of the conference began with student panels presenters Crystal Chokshi, a doctoral candidate in CMF, OM Olanyian, and Pamela Forgrave framing their research in colonialism and the monetization of space. Through a calm, capturing, and well-guided presentation, Chokshi identified the means in which Google's predictive word capture AI (artificial intelligence), featured in its Gmail enterprise, commodifies language. She titled her presentation, 'In Other Words: Smart Compose and the Consequences of Writing in the Age of AI,' describing the means of how Google frames their word capture AI as one of time saving, however, that this AI acts as a form of data colonialism.

In a similar vein of thought, Olanyian discussed racism as a public health crisis, as declared by health and medical organizations across Canada in the summer of 2020 during the Black Lives Matter demonstrations for racial justice. In these public health addresses listing anti-Black racism as a health crisis, Olanyian argued that the *kairos*

associated with framing racism in the health and medical sphere as an ‘emergence’ was a rupture in the Foucaultian sense, as this knowledge had been held by Black communities prior to this public announcement. Olanyian closed their talk with room for hope and change in Black health and wellbeing stating how the health and racism crisis as an emergency could gain the timeliness for resolution of this issue, thereby providing an opportunity in this moment of global health and racial reflection.

The final speaker of the panel—Pamela Forgrave—paralleled the historic relationship of honeybees and honey hunters with contemporary American-based veteran organizations which teach beekeeping to ill, injured, and traumatized soldiers as part of their recovery and community engagement. In this short lightning talk, Forgrave argued that these interactions between the honeybees and humans create a multispecies ‘contact zone’ which work in a paralleled network of various species interacting with one another, similar to Latour (2006) and Law’s (1992) analyses of actor-network theory, which can be seen as paralleling similar lines of thought with Chokshi’s opening presentation on the commodification of words in the interaction between Gmail users and Google’s predictive speech AI. The panel closed with questions asked about commodification of language and congratulations to these three graduate students in their engaging and thought-provoking research, allowing the audience to reflect on their positionality in the wider social-political sphere.

### **Neoliberal Discourses within Platforms**

In considering how crisis is negotiated on digital media platforms, this panel explored how neoliberal logics and user-generated content help shape platform dynamics, constructing knowledges about the world around us. The panellists approached the topic of crisis as mediated through consumer apps that promise connection, inspiration, discussion, and self-optimization. A key thread that links the arguments these scholars made was the understanding that neoliberalism is not just a set of economic policies, but rather a rationale that undergirds our social lives (Brown, 2015). Within this rationale, individualism, self-sufficiency, and self-optimization are the keys to living a good life.

Building on existing scholarly work exploring the affective dimensions of life under neoliberalism, doctoral student Alora Paulsen Mulvey used a local influencer as a case study to demonstrate how within neoliberal rationale, mental health becomes a scarce resource for accumulation – particularly by men. In early 2021, “mental wealth coach” Kaylor Betts went viral on Instagram after sharing a post calling into question the restrictions put into place in his province (Alberta) to combat a growing third wave of COVID-19. Over three days, his following more than tripled and the

video amassed more than 790 thousand views. Paulsen Mulvey argued that the very notion of a “mental wealth coach” implies that mental health is something to be commodified, accumulated, and distributed. If there is mental wealth to be accumulated, it exists in scarce supply. Betts marketized his own mental health struggles to position himself as an expert worthy of attention. Building on Sarah Banet-Weiser’s (2018) notion of popular misogyny as an all-or-nothing reaction to perceived masculine injuries, this presentation understands Betts’ sudden success as a manifestation of popular misogyny. Through a textual discursive analysis of the influencer’s curated Instagram page, Paulsen Mulvey argued that Betts reproduces discourses about hegemonic masculinity as defined by neoliberal logics centred around entrepreneurship and individualism.

Just as mental wealth influencers offer their services as the panacea for the crises of the global pandemic, Direct-to-Consumer (DTC) genetic promises individualized, optimized advice. Tessa Brown’s research considered the relationship between the popularity of DTC genetic testing such as My Ancestry, an increasing number of apps aimed at maximizing human potential, and a culture focused on optimizing productivity under neoliberal capitalism. While Paulsen Mulvey’s case study focused on building affective relationships to instil trust in consumers, Brown’s presentation argued that these apps put the focus on scientific data (genetics) to establish their trustworthiness. They promise to help both regular and prospective users lose weight, sleep better, be more productive, and be better at relationships. Brown was critical of the ways in which these apps feed into the hype surrounding genetic determinism. In offering the key to productivity, self-optimization, and the good life, Brown argued these apps frame themselves as operating with the consumers’ best interest in mind. Yet, the apps provide corporations with huge amounts of personal data including demographic information, location tracking, and even access to DNA sequences. The consequences of this kind of access are often glossed over in favour of the promise of a guaranteed solution to the insecurities that are a result of life under neoliberalism.

Both Paulsen Mulvey and Brown’s work draw on larger discussions about exacerbating fiscal inequality and ways for people to empower themselves through capitalism. Catherine Jeffrey proposed the concept of an economic crisis of scale to explore how the current rate of wealth accumulation increases inequality and complicates our understandings of economic processes. Jeffrey’s initial provocation is the growing class of ‘super rich’ billionaires who have proliferated popular discourse. While still in its early stages, their research adapts the idea of a problem of scale from environmental studies to consider how current infrastructure including fibre optics, code, and algorithms make this accumulation of wealth possible. Their analysis also

included user-generated online content that attempts to communicate the economic crisis of scale to the masses, paying particular attention to how this unimaginable wealth is communicated to everyday people. As such, they considered how apps such as Robo-trader Wealth Simple provide a sense of access to wealth and how users are negotiating the economic crisis. Much like the other panellists, Jeffrey's was interested in how discourses about wealth accumulation are contended with on social media and other applications.

As the researchers on this panel were all interested in applications be they social media, fitness, or investment apps, Phoebe Fuller's presentation outlining her research experience provided important questions about theoretical and methodological considerations for researching these ever-evolving platforms. Fuller's project explored how a diverse group of TikTok users, a video-sharing social media app whose exponential global growth is attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, negotiate body positivity. The pandemic initiated a kind of personal crisis for Fuller, as the platform's growth led to a glut of content during her data collection period. TikTok's unique platform affordances including the coveted 'For You' page, the apps homepage which algorithmically curates individualized user feeds, proved challenging to navigate from a research perspective as it was difficult to discover smaller creators. Furthermore, as much of the user-generated content began to orient itself around pandemic-related videos, Fuller's data set was interrupted. These were important findings for her research, as she concluded that the body positivity movement on TikTok was not as inclusive as it first appeared, instead it continued to reinforce postfeminist ideas about feminized bodies that need to be optimized and controlled.

The platforms discussed in this panel play active roles in our imaginations of the good life and our perception of the world around us. The need for self-optimization that Fuller argues is articulated on TikTok echoes Paulsen Mulvey, Brown, and Jeffrey's research, illustrating how self-optimization is a key tenet of neoliberal rationale. This panel offered important provocations about the proliferation of neoliberal rationale, but also the state of social media and app research during economic and societal crises.

### **From the Global to the Local: Political Economy Framing of Contemporary Media Challenges**

At a digital media conference, held at a distance, the topic of connection is undoubtedly part of most conversations. One panel in particular dug deep and addressed the interwoven threads of infrastructure and policy that underpin our connected world just below the surface. Whether one looks at global examples or local

contexts the exigencies of our communication system are expressed in the organization of broadband access, transport layer internet infrastructure, and media landscape. Trang Pham, Dana Cramer, Katelyn Anderson, and Matthew Halajian each presented an examination of political economic frames of contemporary communications crises.

Humanizing the ligature of communication infrastructure is not an easy task for any academic conference to attempt. With the clear influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated reliance on the means to connecting to one another, this panel brought the human element of the internet to the surface with a focus on the social, economic and geopolitical implications of infrastructure policy. Expressing increased public concerns over the ownership and privacy of public communication infrastructure and implementation policy, these panelists expressed the potential for remediation and rebuilding public trust and participation. By bringing the emotional and cultural elements of policy production to the forefront these contributions expose the raw nerve of public participation and encourage an understanding of infrastructure as an excessively contingent area of study.

In an inspection of our global ecosystem with an inspection in Vietnamese rural residents' internet use, Trang Pham, considered internet use genres as a metric of the success of internet access empowerment as part of the broadband internet rollout. By approaching their research of policy efficacy from the examination of rural resident usage patterns and distinct genres of use, Pham demonstrated the potential for empowerment this limited and nascent broadband expansion project has realized so far. Recognizing a historic discrimination and lack of policy consultation this enabled Pham to consider the ways that rural internet users can express their socioeconomic backgrounds through usage patterns and expression of cultural identity through creative appropriations of their broadband access. Ultimately, this study considered the emancipatory potential of these alternative usage patterns in strengthening local cultural identities rather than diluting them.

Commenting on the transition to global distance work, Dana Cramer considered the Chinese submission to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) of a 'New Internet Protocol.' Through incompatibility with the current Transmission Control Protocol over Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) this proposal would mean an entirely new internet resulting in two, or more 'internets' sprouting from our current paradigm of a singular internet. Highlighting the Chinese Huawei promotional campaign, 'ManyNets' arguing primarily on the basis for data transfer needs for an increasingly data intensive internet environment, Cramer described crisis both as a moment of change and opportunity as this technological shift represents a shift in global

infrastructural direction away from traditional standardizations of telecommunications production. Expressing concern over the concentration of authority within one national context, Cramer elaborated the changing landscape of the internet's infrastructure and suggested possible opportunities and challenges for our global and local contexts.

Bringing us back to our conference city—Calgary—and the country's largest municipal fibre broadband network, Kaetlyn Anderson elucidated the social and economic good of a municipally managed and universally expressed fibre network. Through discussion of the City of Calgary's municipal fibre broadband network, Anderson demonstrated the savings potential of a municipally run fibre network which is automatically implemented as part of the City's construction policy. Considering Calgary's broadband network as an alternative to private internet service providers for dense municipal centres. The City of Calgary broadband network example allows the City to provide service for municipal units and sell excess access to private interests. Comparing this model of municipal access with the high-speed broadband access principles of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC, 2016), Anderson illustrated how municipally managed networks may help achieve these access goals, highlighting the emancipatory potential of broadband access to participate in our modern digitally mediated social world. From the heartland of Canadian private industry interest this entry suggests an opportunity for high quality and affordable municipal service from an ambitiously planned infrastructural imposition in the public interest.

Looking at another public interest question and associated public expenditure, Matthew Halajian considered the media landscape of the 1988 and 2026 Olympic Games bids. Describing what could be considered a crisis of public participation and interest, Halajian provided a quick exploration of how the large-scale sporting events provide opportunities for Calgarians to participate in celebration and recognition of its local community on the global scale. This review highlighted the effect of online public participation and the emotional context of our digital landscape. Comparing the 1988 and 2026 Olympic bids in Calgary, this presentation considered the effect of media coverage and the role that public participation online had on why Calgarians voted 'NO' in 2018.

Panelists provided a unique lens on the multifaceted and often hidden processes of decision-making that occur under the public's perception. Each exposed a wound of our current media landscape and the people, contexts and interests which fester in their unique worlds. While not a positive look at the world of public participatory policy making this conversation invited listeners to consider the role public

and private interests in the creation of public trust and participation. A through line of these discussions was the need for greater understanding of the role of individuals and groups in shaping our world. No panelist provided a fulsome understanding of how best internet materiality and policy participation can be expressed in the interwoven mass of fibre and data composing our COVID-era infrastructure, however, these perspectives can be viewed as a mosaic, prompting us to consider the possible futures expressed in participation, choice and engagement with the growing material space of the internet. In Calgary and across the world these crises provoke many opportunities for research of the physical and the ephemeral internet to join together and consider common challenges to bring the human element to the service with surgical precision.

### **Experiences of Teaching Assistants During the COVID-19 Crisis**

Junior scholars often face challenges with teaching borne of a lack of formalized training before they are set loose in face-to-face course settings with students who—through no fault of their own—also have a limited conception of what this relationship is to look like. Teaching Assistants (TAs) face the proverbial trial by fire that crafts both great teaching professors and the more scholarly academic sort as an implicit rite of passage where TAs codevelop their teaching styles with students (whether one chooses to recognize this or not) in a catch as catch can approach. It is in many cases considered a natural process through which academics learn the necessary skills to survive in teaching at the post-secondary level; but when we consider that TAs during the COVID-19 pandemic were in many cases on the frontline of transitions to online learning, this picture becomes much starker with the personal, educational and professional implications of compounding crises of experience and resources expressed in new pressures online.

As TAs, Tessa Brown, Calli Nash, Kennedy French-Toller, Rachel Huh, and Anastasia Gushchina described their experience with the online teaching transition, the points of friction in junior scholarship become more apparent. Their mistakes and triumphs were unique and facilitate a deeper understanding of the role of teaching without the feedback of students in-person. While this inherent crucible provided opportunities for the growth and development of online teaching skills, it also illustrated the need for greater understanding and resource sharing between TAs and from institutions to prepare junior scholars when the feedback inherent to in-person instruction is ripped away. This panel discussed the methods attempted, as well the resources accessed, throughout teaching in the COVID-19 pandemic both successfully and unsuccessfully. In a true about face to the siloed nature of academic study, this group shared invaluable learned experience from undergraduate students about the

virtual classroom experience that is lost in the traditional academic format. Skills-sharing as a collaborative process troubles the persistent perception among junior scholars of the need to work in isolation by demonstrating the connections and strength that collaborative teaching and learning can bring to an online environment.

I (Drew Thomas) was impressed by the frank and open discussion of the deficiencies of TA training and the crucible method of learning teaching skills. It is beyond refreshing to realize the feelings of isolation and uncertainty caused by the switch to online courses is in many respects self-imposed by this outdated sink or swim model. By modeling a cooperative and collaborative approach to teaching that supports unique engagement with the scholarship of teaching and learning the panelists argued convincingly for the need for collaboration and resource sharing between junior scholars. This was paired with suggestions sourced from their collective experience for ways that universities could support junior scholars, the instructors they assist, and the students who are so integral to this approach. It was a welcome addition to conversations that were so often focused on problems that presented a solutions-focused response to current and historical pressures in teaching as a junior scholar.

## **Conclusion**

As this white paper has demonstrated, crisis is understood in varying forms. As it relates to activism, memory capture, internet connections, teaching, this term is felt in various research trajectories by graduate students in the pandemic's 2020-2021 timeframe. In Canada—where the vast majority of presentations took place and where the host university (University of Calgary) is located, crisis can be matched with opportunity. The opportunity to learn, to shift previous cultural norms which have disadvantaged marginalized communities, to build back stronger.

In the final student session of the Opportunities in a Crisis conference, graduate student and the conference's Chair, Dana Cramer, provided a skills sharing session titled, '#SuccessfulGradStudent: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum of Grad School,' where she outlined resources and learned knowledge of the academic job market to help inform those thinking about attending graduate school and first-year master's students. In reflecting on attending graduate school during a global pandemic, we the authors, have found the experience to be labourious, daunting, and oftentimes exhausting. With every challenge, however, there is an opportunity. Completing graduate school in a crisis is no small feat and provides opportunities for students to increase their digital literacy, learn effective time management skills to help decrease distractions and procrastination, and allow for engagement in more activities with newfound time saved from no travel to an office. The research presented at the

University of Calgary Department of Communication, Media and Film's graduate student conference, has shown the resiliency, creativity, and excellent scholarly work of the next generation of graduate students, which we believe will lead us to new beginnings following the end of the pandemic.

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