

editorial

Seasons of crisis Christopher Balme

When we wrote and submitted the proposal for the Käte Hamburger Research Centre **global dis:connect** in January 2020, a global pandemic caused by a coronavirus existed only in the prescient minds of the Johns Hopkins Centre for Health Security. Starting in 2001, the Centre held a series of public ‘pandemic exercises’ to anticipate the impact of different types of pandemics. The names followed a descending arc of gloom from Dark Winter in 2001 to Atlantic Storm in 2005 to the more neutral Clade X in 2018. The format varied little. A group of experts was confronted with a scenario describing a public health crisis to which they had to respond with little preparation. Their interactions were recorded and, in the later versions, broadcast on the internet. These experts were civil servants, representatives of pharmaceutical companies and high-ranking employees of NGOs such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The most accurate forecast came from the last and most innocuous-sounding event so far, Event 201, which took place in autumn 2019 shortly before the Covid-19 outbreak and anticipated the future with frightening accuracy. The scenario postulated the outbreak of a coronavirus in China, transmitted from animals (in this case pigs) to humans and spreading rapidly. The scenario was structured around four themes or acts: global distribution of medical material; travel restrictions and economic consequences; a financial crisis; spread of misinformation via the internet. Each section was introduced by a fictional CNN-style television report. Viewers could (and still can) watch the improvised responses of the experts, who had to react to the



You can also find **static**
online at
www.globaldisconnect.org



rapidly evolving situations. The results were presented in the form of a ‘scenario epilogue’.

The experts got it pretty much right: the exercise predicted not only a coronavirus originating in China and affecting the whole world, but also the resulting economic and health impacts, including the spread of misinformation via social media. The only prediction where they were off the mark was the slow development of vaccines.

Tabletop exercises are a hybrid genre. Because they are based on scenarios and are quite literally ‘acted out’, albeit by experts performing their professional roles, the whole exercise has the air of a theatrical performance: while it looks and sounds authentic, we know, as observers, it is not real. How can it be? The whole performance is based on supposition; it takes place in an imagined future.

The first issue of *static* engaged not surprisingly with the Covid crisis. This crisis had impacted the whole world and the first year of *global dis:connect*. It also mentions other crises such as climate change, breakdowns in logistics and the multifarious ways they are interconnected and correspondingly disruptive when dysfunctional. Between writing and publication, another crisis erupted, Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine, which set in motion a series of further, political, economic and energy-based disruptions. Meanwhile, the Covid pandemic looks set to continue as the virus mutates and behaviours revert to pre-pandemic mode.

We are living in an age of continual, overlapping crises, as Roland Wenzlhuemer pointed out in his contribution, *Crisis and dis:connectivity*.¹ Far from being a temporary interruption, the state of emergency seems to be constant. Global crises would seem to embody by definition the key concepts of dis:connectivity, as was argued in the editorial. If the ‘state of exception’ is the new normal, then how can a concept such as dis:connectivity be formulated to address these overlapping crises? The answer to this question requires rethinking our notions of temporality, especially the future.

In Germany the daily ‘Corona-Ticker’ has been replaced or joined by the energy monitor, with daily updates information on gas storage and use – a perfect device to induce anxiety. We are continually calculating the future, by the week, month and year. How do we get through the coming winter? We wait for the next spring and summer to reduce infection rates and energy costs. In other words, our notions of the future are linked to the seasons once again. Never did Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* seem more apposite as technologically advanced societies look at the seasons with

¹ Roland Wenzlhuemer, ‘Crisis and Dis:Connectivity’, *static: thoughts and research from global dis:connect* 1, no. 1 (2022): 9–13.

both foreboding and hopeful anticipation. The temporality of crisis is seasonal. The first tabletop exercise conducted by the Johns Hopkins Centre for Health Security was entitled Dark Winter. It posited a terrorist attack using smallpox as a weapon. As the sociologists Grégoire Mallard and Andrew Lakoff state in their analysis of the exercise: “Nature” was now the only opponent against which the United States was playing.² It would also be an apt title for the coming season.



2 Grégoire Mallard and Andrew Lakoff, 'How Claims to Know the Future Are Used to Understand the Present Techniques of Prospection in the Field of National Security', in *Social Knowledge in the Making*, ed. Charles Camic, Neil Gross, and Lamont (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 366.