

Leisure in the Time of Coronavirus: A Rapid Response Special Issue

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Leisure Sciences

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ABSTRACT

As the world grapples with the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, on almost every news website, across social media, and also in its (many) absences, leisure has taken on new significance in both managing and negotiating a global crisis. Amidst the disruption, inconvenience, illness, fear, uncertainty, tragedy and loss from this disease, there are also opportunities for leisure scholars to generate discussions and to learn, to engage with wider debates about the crucial role of leisure in people's lives—during this pandemic, and beyond. This introduction lays out the foundations and scope of this special issue on leisure in the time of coronavirus.

Keywords: Coronavirus ; COVID-19 ; leisure ; pandemic

As we write this introduction at the end of May 2020, the COVID-19 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, or SARS-CoV-2) pandemic has claimed the lives of over 300,000 people and more than 5 million people have been infected worldwide. In attempts to contain the spread of COVID-19 and increase the safety of citizens, many countries have enforced lockdowns – although some have now begun to ease restrictions – requiring people “stay home” to “stay safe.” As we have worked on this special issue, over half of the world has been living with some form of lockdown and “social” (physical) distancing: schools have been closed for most students, and where feasible, people have been asked to work from home; many workers have been furloughed, or have found themselves suddenly unemployed. At great risk to themselves and their families, many in health care have been working relentlessly to save lives, while legions have provided essential services, such as keeping public transport running, making deliveries, or ensuring there is food in supermarkets. In a matter of just a few months, COVID-19 has inescapably transformed the world.

Where lockdowns are in effect, almost all leisure spaces outside the home – restaurants, pubs, bars and nightclubs, leisure centers and gyms, arts venues, theaters, cinemas, museums and galleries – have been closed; most sports events have been canceled and the 2020 Olympic Games postponed for the first time in modern history. Parks, beaches and monuments have been closed, too (and others have re-opened too soon). Tourism is at a standstill, with borders closed and travel restricted. From home (for those fortunate enough to have them), in physical isolation, and in attempts to socialize, at no time in recent memory has leisure seemed so vital, and yet also so hauntingly absent.

“May you live in interesting times”?

Although it sounds like a blessing, the phrase “may you live in interesting times” is always used with irony: it is understood that uninteresting times are preferable to “interesting” ones, which are usually times of great hardships.

These are, in every mordant sense of the phrase, *interesting times*. Unprecedented times. Challenging times. Scoundrel times, too, adapting a title from the playwright Lillian Hellman (1976), in view of the delays and failings of some governments during this pandemic (Glanz & Robertson, 2020; Scally et al., 2020).

These are also important times to pause, reflect, rethink, and learn – an “awakening of consciousness” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133) – to imagine a different world. We recognize, as the poet, novelist and psychologist Hala Alyan (2020) reminds us, that questions such as “what good can come of this?” are questions of the lucky, of the privileged. Yet, amidst the loss, grief and trauma of COVID-19, can the world be made anew? “What good?” Alyan repeats, again and again. Environmental activists such as Greta Thunberg, David Attenborough, and George Monbiot have called this “a time to rethink everything”; for Monbiot (2020) this could be a “a Great Reset. Let’s use it to change the way we see ourselves and our place on Earth.” Writing for the BBC, Syed (2020) noted one “upside to all this downtime” was the opportunity “to reimagine the world and one’s place within it,” using the pandemic as a kind of “reversal technique” to imagine new ideas and opportunities: was the leisure that many people had really what people wanted or needed? As many of the commentaries in this special issue convey, the pandemic has brought a re-appraisal of many leisure practices that were uncritically accepted, environmentally unsustainable, or systemically oppressive during “normal times.” Contributors also highlight new, creative re-imaginings of leisure in response to the vicissitudes of physical distancing and enforced stay-at-home orders, and the innovative leisure affordances of online, virtual, digital spaces.

The pandemic has brought increased attention to many often-overlooked significances of leisure in everyday life, including those practices which may be referred to as a kind of slow leisure (Andrews, 2006). Examples abound, and some may have become familiar as “magnified moments” (Hochschild, 1994, p. 4) that are, perhaps, emblematic stories¹ of the lockdown: from children’s hand-drawn rainbows displayed in windows with the phrase “everything will be alright” (“*andrà tutto bene*” in Italian; Otte, 2020), to balcony concerts (Clinch, 2020), shared TikTok dance videos (Awha, 2020), backyard marathons (Farzan, 2020), birthday parades (Picard, 2020), Teddy Bear hunts (New Zealand Bear Hunt, 2020), home workouts (Wicks, 2020), and widespread volunteering to help neighbors. The critical commentaries in this special issue also explore online get-togethers, social media use, digital games and other forms of virtual play that have seen dramatically increased participation. At the same time, older pastimes such as board games and jigsaw puzzles (Butler, 2020), sewing (Smart, 2020) and home baking (Morton, 2020) have also seen renewed interest, too. These examples only begin to intone some of the immediate and often creative leisure adaptations and responses to the current moment.

The pandemic also has exposed persistent and vexing social problems that have been exacerbated during this crisis. These are also (often) manifest as questions of leisure, including matters of privilege and social inequalities (e.g., those escaping crowded cities to 2nd homes in rural areas; Ibrahim, 2020); the absence of leisure for homeless people who cannot “stay home” to stay safe (Levin, 2020); the lack of spaces for children to play while confined in inadequate housing (Rosenthal et al., 2020), alarming increases of domestic violence during lockdown (Taub, 2020); the stark inequities of work and leisure at home especially for those who identify as women who are caregivers or are home-schooling their children (Fazackerley, 2020); the utter absence of leisure for those restricted to refugee camps or migrant detention centers (Strauss & Zander, 2020); and in view of public leisure spaces, there is also increased xenophobia and racist violence (e.g. toward members of east Asian communities; e.g., Tavernise & Oppel, 2020). For many, this moment is a double crisis, or worse, where coronavirus has compounded already difficult circumstances. Many of these issues are addressed by authors in this special issue, particularly in relation to identity politics, social inequalities and inequities.

Additionally, the pandemic has laid bare a number of difficult truths about leisure in contemporary, neoliberal societies. Neoliberalism is characterized by the marketization and commoditization of everyday life, the primacy of the individual, the accumulation of private capital and private property, in which the State protects markets and private property, but otherwise does not intervene, such as in the social welfare or healthcare of citizens (Harvey, 2005). The COVID-19 pandemic has demanded large-scale State (and supra-national) interventions, affordable public healthcare systems, far-reaching unemployment and welfare benefits (stimulus packages) and an economic shutdown. Neoliberal ideologies of the failed or “flawed” citizen (Bauman, 1998, p.1) as one who cannot consume unravels and frays when most commercial leisure spaces (shops and shopping centers, restaurants and bars, gyms and fitness clubs, professional sports venues, etc.) are closed. The COVID-19 crisis presents a moment to raise questions of shifting priori-

ties toward greater collective social responsibilities, mutual interdependencies, shared resources, and collaborative approaches to social problems. Recent public polling has suggested that a majority of Britons (8 out of 10) want the government to prioritize health and wellbeing over economic measurements as indicators of quality of life (Harvey, 2020). Announcing the publication of the *World Happiness Report* (2020) of its authors exclaimed: “To get through this [COVID-19] we’re going to have to develop a much higher level of social responsibility [and] move from an atomised society to a much more caring one” while adding: “Happiness is contagious too” (Moorhead, 2020).

Many of our contributing authors explore possible post-coronavirus leisure futures. Mair (2020) argued that an entirely “different mindset” is needed from neoliberalism: “Coronavirus, like climate change, is partly a problem of our economic structure. Although both appear to be ‘environmental’ or ‘natural’ problems, they are socially driven” and thus demand social solutions. Some solutions centralize leisure, such as shortening the working week, as well as some form of Universal Basic Income (Lashua, 2018). Some of our authors have written about the pandemic as a vital moment of leisure to pause, to stop, and to grieve. Amidst difficult lessons about “grief, empathy, and hope”, for Alyan (2020, para. 14), “[t]his pandemic seems to have at its core a lesson of kinship. What do we owe each other? What do we owe strangers on the other side of the world? *Pull a thread here and you’ll find it’s attached to the rest of the world.*” We hope that this special issue represents such core lessons and plucks at such threads.

Leisure sciences in the time of coronavirus – and beyond

We remain acutely aware that these are complicated, disrupted, and difficult moments for scholars, too. We received some criticism, on social media and in personal correspondence, regarding the call for abstracts for this special issue. Is a “rapid response” special issue a form of hurried, smash-and-grab scholarship? We certainly do not think so, but we will let the commentaries speak for themselves. Some colleagues on Twitter raised concerns about “journalistic” outputs, and also questioned the abbreviated timelines for the special issue. In view of the former, we have invited scholarly short essays – “critical commentaries” – a standard academic format, that, once again, we will let speak for themselves. If journalistic in any sense, we sought only to invite commentaries that connect, highlight, or critique the relevance of leisure scholarship in the current moment; that is, to write with and through the pandemic as it is being discussed and debated on social media and in the news. Journalistic accusations aside, each commentary was peer-reviewed by two or more scholars.

A few were against a special issue in the midst of a pandemic; there will, no doubt, be volumes published about this crisis for years to come, and we will welcome those. However, at no other time in recent memory can we recall a moment when leisure has seemed both as utterly important, and yet so dramatically diminished. As Ken Roberts (2020) wrote in a recent blog for the Leisure Studies Association, the voices of leisure scholars are utterly vital at this moment, noting “this is a once in a lifetime moment when leisure’s voice must speak loudly.” We agree wholeheartedly, and add that “leisure’s voice” is a diverse chorus, polyvocal and polyphonic – at times dissonant, too. This special issue is just one collection, in what we hope, like Roberts, is part of a loud and strong set of voices that will continue to speak of the importance of leisure.

We are grateful for the voices of all the authors, including those who submitted over 150 abstracts for initial consideration, and especially those who produced commentaries (all of whom agreed to review essays too). We owe particular thanks to the *Leisure Sciences* editorial assistant, Chris Hurst, a PhD student at the University of Waterloo, for her outstanding work and superlative organization in managing all phases of this special issue. We would also like to acknowledge Taylor and Francis for their continued support of our requests to do publishing differently, specifically Katie Gezi and Jacqueline Carrick. We have been humbled by the unwavering efforts and enthusiasm from everyone who has been involved, throughout.

We also have been heartened by the diversity of topics and contributors. Such diversity has been a core value for *Leisure Sciences* during Corey and Diana’s tenure as Coeditors. In this regard, we note that more than half (55%) of the contributing authors identify as women and 45% as men. We have had global participation, although highly Western representation, with scholars from Canada (37%), USA (39%), UK (13%), Australia (4.5%), New Zealand (4.5%), and Belgium (2%). The special issue includes voices from White, Black and Asian perspectives. It also transcends academic ranks, with contributions from PhD students, post-doctoral fellows, lecturers and assistant professors, associate professors and senior lecturers, senior research fellows, professors and retired professors. Commentary topics also encompass much of the breadth of the leisure studies field, spotlighting recreation, sport, tourism, sociology,

kinesiology, health, media, music, therapeutic recreation, youth development and higher education. Even with 46 essays, this special double issue offers just a snapshot of leisure in this moment. We acknowledge that there are gaps and omissions: Indigenous voices in particular are not present in this collection, amongst other important critical views. There is yet more work to do, for greater diversity, and toward internationalizing the journal.

Above all, we are reminded that leisure remains an important lens through which to view, question, debate and understand the world. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has had immeasurable health and economic impacts; equally, there have been enormous social and political impacts too, with waves and ripples to resound for some time to come. As an interdisciplinary journal, *Leisure Sciences* provides a space for critical scholarship that spans these impacts, particularly during such unprecedented and distressingly *interesting* times.

¹. Hochschild (1994, p. 4) explained: “Stories contain magnified moments, episodes of heightened importance, either epiphanies, moments of intense glee or unusual insight, or moments in which things go intensely but meaningfully wrong. In either case, the moment stands out; it is metaphorically rich, unusually elaborate and often echoes throughout” the story.

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C1 Author: Please add to this citation: (Helliwell, et al. 2020). ;

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