

Report

Narrating New Normal

Graduate Student Symposium Report

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Abstract

This article summarizes the events at Narrating New Normal: Graduate Student Symposium, held virtually on May 17–18, 2021. The symposium was organized by a number of graduate students from the School of Communication and Film (previously named the School of Communication) and was supported by *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images* and the School of Communication and Film. It was attended by an international roster of graduate students hailing from academic institutions and think tanks in different countries. The presentations focused on the usage of the phrase *new normal*, a popular term during crises, in various geopolitical, geocultural, and historical contexts. The essay discusses first the background and theoretical framework that informs the symposium. Conceived during the COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis that has seen the use of the phrase *new normal* in describing the shifts in our daily lives or imaginations of a postcrisis future. Taking a critical approach, the symposium aims to interrogate how the phrase is used by different social institutions, corporations, and individuals in various crises, considering how it normalizes precarity. This essay also summarizes the keynote lecture delivered by professor Michal Krzyzanowski (Uppsala University) on the discursive strategies of normalization and mainstreaming. It also covers the papers and discussions across four panels that examined the different aspects of normalization and of new normal in its various incarnations: geopolitics, networked media spaces, normalization of precarity in everyday life, and popular

culture. The article ends by offering a synthesis of the major threads that tie the presentations and addresses together. It proposes that while the phrase *new normal* normalizes and obfuscates precarity, it also suggests that there are pockets of optimism during crises where we can witness human resilience and individual agency.

Keywords: new normal, normalization, crises, precarity

Our journal, *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images* hosted a graduate student symposium, *Narrating New Normal*, on May 17–18, 2021. Organized by five graduate students¹ from HKBU's School of Communication and Film (formerly School of Communication), the symposium was supported by the Centre for Film and Moving Image Research, Academy of Film, School of Communication and Film. The symposium is concerned with the meanings and usages of the phrase *new normal* and how it suggests a vision of a stable future, even as it obscures and even sugarcoats a cluster of critical issues, least of which is social inequalities. The presentations in the symposium collectively investigate how *new normal* is used in various geopolitical, geocultural, and geohistorical contexts, paying close attention to the role of media in the deployment of the phrase. The presentations covered a wide spectrum of topics, ranging from the usage of new normal in national/international politics; to the struggles and experiences of gender, sexual, and racial minorities during crises; to how ordinary people use different media to make sense of the changes wrought by crises and the adjustments the new normal demands.

COVID-19 and the Ubiquity of New Normal

The world has been grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic for more than a year now. Millions have fallen sick and lost their lives, and many more lost their

1. The authors of this report.

jobs. Economies have been declining and health-care systems have collapsed, leaving governments scrambling to contain the paralyzing effects of the pandemic on our political, economic, cultural, social, and personal lives. The media, governments, corporations, and even ordinary netizens readily deploy the phrase *new normal* to signify how the pandemic affected and disrupted our daily lives. Different organizations use the phrase to imagine how the postpandemic future will be. The United Nations, for example, claim that the new normal will see all facets of life integrated in digital systems, seeing how the pandemic forced all imaginable human activities to be conducted online.² Despite its ubiquity, the phrase is not new and has been used in the media in recent memory. Writing mostly on the financial measures individuals and families must observe following the 2008 financial meltdown, William Galston argued that the new normal must be a “new era of public [spending] restraint, not just private thrift.”³ The phrase was also used in China to refer to diminished GDP growth in the early 2010s. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) president Xi Jinping described China’s economy as entering a more stable new normal (*xin changtai* 新常态) compared to the rapid economic growth that China sustained for years.⁴ As the Chinese media kept promoting and repeating the term, the public grew calmer and more assured, thanks to the framing of the issue as a new normal.

A thread that holds these deployments of new normal is how it legitimizes policies that ensure the organizational survival of governments, corporations, and institutions while treating individuals as expendable resources. New normal signifies a vision of a stable postcrisis future, obfuscating how new inequalities emerge and how the old ones survive and mutate. The new

2. United Nations, “The New Normal Is Digital,” United Nations, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/desa/new-normal-digital>.

3. William A. Galston, “The ‘New Normal’ for the U.S. Economy: What Will It Be?,” Brookings Institute, September 1, 2009, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-new-normal-for-the-u-s-economy-what-will-it-be/>.

4. “New Normal in Economic Development,” *China Daily*, October 5, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpnationalcongress/2017-10/05/content_32869258.htm.

normal promises that crises are just temporary that will resolve by themselves, giving rise to a new way of life, if not a new social order. The new normal signifies stories of survival, of how individuals cope in the face of adversity, and of how ordinary people get by as institutions and corporations ensure their own survival. Despite the optimism that the phrase carries, new normal also hides stories of inequalities that widen the gap between the rich and the poor, the have and the have-nots, and the majority and the minorities.

The Symposium

The foregoing serves as the impetus for launching the symposium. Held via Zoom, the symposium brought together graduate students from various



Figure 1: The faculty, students, and staff of the School of Communication, HKBU, at Narrating New Normal: Graduate Student Symposium.
Source: File photo.

institutions in thinking about new normal in different political, cultural, economic, and historical contexts. The symposium aimed to investigate how Internet users, film and media makers, institutions, governments, and cultural organizations weave narratives using new normal to shape reality, produce knowledge, and make emotional sense of drastic changes. Its goal is to be an academic platform where young scholars can present their debates about the affect (i.e., emotional aspects) and effect (e.g., social impact) of new normal. With its popular usage among governments, media, social institutions, and netizens, what exactly does new normal mean? What stories do people and organizations tell using new normal? Who tells these stories and how are these stories told?

The symposium commenced on May 17, 2021, with professor Yu Huang, the dean of the School of Communication and Film at HKBU, giving the opening remarks. Professor Huang stressed the importance of continuing debates and academic discussions even amid a crisis. He said that



Figure 2: Professor Yu Huang, the dean of the School of Communication, delivers his opening remarks. *Source:* File photo.

universities have a role to play in advancing knowledge during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and engaging graduate students in academic discussions are important and rewarding learning experiences for academics. Professor Huang expressed hope that once the pandemic subsides, the school can host and invite graduate students again in lively face-to-face discussion. In his speech, the associate dean for postgraduate studies of the School of Communication and Film, professor Steve Guo, noted that this is the first international graduate student symposium the school has hosted. He remarked how the symposium captured the “3 Ds”: diversity in presenters and topics, depth in probing, and developing the critical understanding of the world. Indeed, the symposium has an international roster of student-presenters—from the Philippines, Hong Kong, India, Mainland China, Nigeria, Greece—and come from diverse cultural backgrounds. They hail from academic institutions in Hong Kong, the Philippines, the United States, France, the PRC, Japan, and India, and all are within the various stages of their graduate studies. Dr. Celine Song, head of the Research Postgraduate Committee of the School of Communication and Film, also delivered the welcoming remarks on the second day of the symposium. Song emphasized how the symposium acts as a platform where graduate students can present their works to the wider academic community. She said that *Narrating New Normal* is an important inter- and cross-disciplinary venue where graduate students and the senior academics can learn from each other.

The keynote speech was delivered by Michal Krzyzanowski, chair professor at Uppsala University, Sweden. Krzyzanowski is one of the leading scholars in the normalization of the politics of exclusion in the context of communication, media, and social changes.⁵ In his lecture entitled “Crisis In/and the ‘New Normal’: Discursive Strategies of Normalization and Mainstreaming,” he explored the notion of normalization by first

5. Michal Krzyzanowski, “Crisis in/of ‘New Normal’: Discursive Strategies of Normalization and Mainstreaming” (keynote lecture presented at *Narrating New Normal: Graduate Student Symposium*, May 17–18, 2021, Hong Kong Baptist University and through virtual platforms).

distinguishing the differences between norms, normality, normalization, and discourse. Then he argued that “the new normal” is a social and political construct that relies on a number of factors, including the legitimation of social and political norms and normalities triggered by imaginaries of crisis. By drawing examples from the most recent COVID-19 pandemics to the refugee crisis in Europe, he explained that normalization is a key step in the process of “discursive shifts” for the political and media practices, eventually contributing to the formation of the newer, wider, and more explicitly exclusionary “common sense.” The talk laid the foundation for the panel discussion as Kryzanowski provided a theoretical explanation of what new normal really means, and the notion is not only confined by the current global pandemics but also a recurring phenomenon in many moments of crisis and social changes.

The first panel, “Public Agenda and the Geopolitics of Normalization,” was chaired by professor Daya Kishan Thussu from the Department of Journalism. The papers in this panel examined the politics behind new normal in different geographical contexts. The panel analyzed the media’s role in the construction of new normal from the perspective of political elites and ordinary Internet users. Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis (HKBU) presented a paper on how the government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Greece used the phrase *new normal* and *new normality* to weave narratives and promises of stability as the country was pummeled by economic problems and the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ Karyotakis noted how the phrase, which was supposed to mean a return to prosperity and stability, was weaponized to curtail fundamental rights and further polarized the Greek public. Using critical discourse analysis and securitization theory, Karyotakis’s presentation argued that the new normal represented a decline in democracy, an issue that became more polarizing during the pandemic. Mistura Adebussola Salaudeen (HKBU) expounded on the new normality in the context

6. Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis, “Storytelling the ‘New Normality’ of Covid-19 through Greece’s Prime Minister on YouTube” (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

of China's growing presence in Africa and explored the articulations of Nigerian elites about the impact of China's soft power tactics on Nigeria's economic and political landscape.⁷ Salaudeen, in her presentation, found that among Nigerian elites, there was a general admiration of China's diplomacy and an acceptance of Chinese partnership, albeit a disdain for Chinese products and a growing skepticism of China's uncertain motives and influence in Nigeria. She concluded that even though Nigerian elites admire China's rapid self-development and applaud its brazen challenge of Western dominance, they, however, doubt China's intentions for Africa are any different from Western imperialism, hence the general disposition of "mitigated skepticism." Srijia Sanyal (Institute of Globally Distributed Open Research and Education) investigated how women are disproportionately affected by the pandemic in terms of workplace dynamics and economic prospects.⁸ She argued that because the workplace and family life have been conflated into one space, women are forced to juggle different roles simultaneously while enduring domestic abuse from their partners. Sanyal noted how the unequal gender relations in India have been exacerbated during the pandemic and how these inequalities are normalized or obfuscated in workplaces and at home. Together, these presentations showed how the phrase *new normal* operates in a range of geocultural and geopolitical contexts. The cases elucidate how the new normal is being used and contested among political elites for control and political gains, and this contestation may not always benefit the ordinary people. As Karyotakis and Salaudeen's presentations showed, the power struggle that accompanies crisis and political changes mostly benefits the interests of the political elite. Sanyal's presentation showed us the other end of the spectrum. In a scramble to address the pandemic, corporations and governments provide policies and solutions that collapse private, professional, and public life in the domestic

7. Mistura Adebusola Salaudeen, "Is China the New Normal? Analysing Elite Conversations on Sino-African Partnership" (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

8. Srijia Sanyal, "Beating the Pandemic Effect Inside and Out: Stories of Indian Corporate Women" (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

sphere, causing disproportionate amounts of work, and sometimes abuse, to women.

The second panel, entitled “Negotiation of Normality in Networked Media Spaces,” was chaired by Academy of Film assistant professor Dr. Mateja Kovacic. The panel presented cases on how new normal is deployed within online and networked spaces and how the phrase shapes collective memories, collective identities, and collective experiences of Internet users. Yaqian Lai (Central Academy of Fine Arts, China) and Xiaomo Liu (University of Bordeaux Montaigne, France) investigated how self-made audiovisual recordings of the medical situation in China during the COVID-19 pandemic reshapes people’s collective memory of the crisis.⁹ They argue that these user-generated narratives render the events not covered by mainstream media visible. Continuing their presentation, Lai and Liu suggested that these contents are recut and remixed by other users, and the emerging videos replicate the narratives propagated by mainstream media, producing a collective memory that is simultaneously sentimental and vague. Ruepert Jiel Dionisio Cao (HKBU) presented his paper on the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to gay amateur porn producers in the Philippines.¹⁰ Cao argues that porn networks are important cultural, political, and affective spaces for gay men to legitimize their identity and sexuality. He suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic highlights how the crises reinforce traditional notions and attitudes on gay sexuality, leaving gay men struggling to fulfill their need for sexual contact, intimacy, and socialization. Cao proposes that, ultimately, the prevailing discourse on new normal glosses over people’s needs to express themselves sexually and crisis becomes an opportunity to reinforce “normal” or conservative attitudes toward sexuality. Focusing on gaming,

9. Yaqian Lai and Xiaomo Liu, “Urge to Remember, Rush to Forget: How Short-video Recuts on Social Media Reshape the Chinese Collective Memory of Covid-19 Outbreak” (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

10. Ruepert Jiel Dionisio Cao, “How COVID-19 Disrupted the Amateur Porn Circuits in the Philippines and Its Impact in Sexual Politics” (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

Zixuan Zhu (HKBU) reflected on how the advancement in new media technologies normalizes shorter, leaner, and fragmented narratives that warrant shallower intellectual and affective engagement from the player.¹¹ But Zhu argues that the online interactivity encouraged by contemporary games allows users to exercise their agency by constructing their own narratives about these games. Kovacic explained that a running thread in this panel was displacement and how crisis displaces people, creating new social relations and practices in the process. Kovacic explained that displacement creates new venues for contestation between the minority and the majority, between the powerful and the powerless. This, according to Kovacic, allows for the emergence of new social structures but at the same time cautions that crises may also result in the reinforcement of old hierarchies and power relations.



Figure 3: The symposium participants attending a presentation. A small body of audience gathered at HKBU for the symposium. *Source:* File photo.

11. Zixuan Zhu, "Interaction and Narrative in Online Games" (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

The third panel, “Narratives of Precarity and Everyday Life Under the New Normal,” centered on the everyday experiences ordinary people experience during crises and the predicaments and opportunities for creativity ensuing during difficult times. It was chaired by professor Cherian George, the associate dean (Research and Development) of the School of Communication and Film. In her presentation, Namrata Nagar (Rochester Institute of Technology, United States) showcased a “slice of immigrant life in the epicenter of COVID-19” through the images she captured about her everyday life in New York City. Nagar highlights the resilience (“the true spirit of the human race”) of the citizens, alongside their feelings of frustration, when they respond to the crisis, which leads to a rethinking of the concept of new normal.¹² Nagar’s presentation was both personal and conceptual. It tells of the changes that happened in New York City through her own subjectivities as an immigrant as she tried to grapple with the rapid changes and fast-paced life in the city. Yet, it also explores the notions of human resilience and adaptability and how digital media serves as an archive of narratives of resilience and adaptability. With a focus on how ordinary people use the Internet to meet their material and financial needs, Joy Hannah Panaligan (De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde) talked about online bartering in the Philippines.¹³ This primitive system, practiced by pre-Hispanic Filipinos, involves trading raw materials instead of money and has seen a resurgence in the pandemic. Panaligan explains that the digital barter system allows people to help anonymously, changing the nature of the barter system from an economic system to a way of practicing one’s social duty to help others (i.e., *bayanihan*). Panaligan also argues that the digital barter system is also a product of poor governance that leaves people fending for themselves. During the discussion, one theme that emerged was that of resilience and how resilience allows people to move forward despite adversity. Yet, as it was clearly discussed during the presentation that resilience is also a

12. Namrata Nagar, “The New Normal in New York City, 2020” (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

13. Joy Hannah Panaligan, “Examining the Concept of Online Bartering System in Facebook Group Communities” (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

product of political and economic systems that ignore underprivileged sectors in the society.

Dr. Dorothy Lau, an assistant professor at the Academy of Film (HKBU) chaired the fourth panel of the symposium, “Popular Culture and the New Normal.” In this panel, the presenters shared their perspectives of the new normal through popular culture such as music, films, and fandom community. Dong Wei discussed how Jia Zhangke’s portrayal of Shanxi in the film *Mountains May Depart* indicates the passive handling and intervention of China’s unsustainable development of industrialization. She frames the nation’s official rhetoric of the economic slowdown and structural irrationality as the economic new normal.¹⁴ Concluding with an overview of the miners in Jia’s other films, Wei correlated the individual’s fates with the nation’s rhetoric of economic new normal, which is a passive route of industrialization in postsocialist China. Shiqi Lin analyzed Wuhan-themed music during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, where she unpacked her personal pandemic music library and related different moments of 2020 to songs of seemingly discrete contexts, ranging from Chinese rock band OYS’s “Kill the One from Shijiazhuang” (*shasi nage shijiazhuang ren* 杀死那个石家庄人) to US hip-hop group the Black Eyed Peas’ “Where Is the Love?”¹⁵ She argued that the ephemeral, fragmentary, and relational nature of music has turned this particular medium into a “connector” of affects across different subjectivities, cultures, languages, and historical periods. Kris Li’s paper analyzed the visual languages as well as the narrative tropes from idols’ media products, primarily in the form of music videos during the prolonged coronavirus period.¹⁶ He identified the different time-conceptions of the

14. Dong Wei, “Passive Chinese Industrialization: Jia Zhangke’s *Mountains May Depart* under the Context of Economic ‘New Normal’” (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

15. Shiqi Lin, “A Pandemic Music Library: Sonic Documentation in a Time of Crisis” (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

16. Kris Li Chung Tai, “‘I will always be here waiting for you!’—Reconfiguring Fan Community of Japanese Idols in the Coronavirus Time” (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

pandemic: as a one-off shock and prolonged shared challenges faced by both idol groups and their fan community and how this factor further shapes the ongoing experience of a broken community.

Lau, concurrently the managing editor of *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images*, led the unveiling of the journal. Lau emphasizes the mission of the journal: to be a leading platform for intellectual debates on the “affect and effect” of storytelling across different media platforms. Published open access by Michigan Publishing, *Global Storytelling* aims to be an accessible platform for academics and intellectuals investigating the impact of media technologies on storytelling. The journal’s mission resonated with the theme of the symposium. The symposium explored how new normal instigates specific emotional responses and the social impacts its usage brings. One theme that emerged from the symposium is how media weaves narratives of crises and normality that imagines a stable future yet conceals the oppressive nature of the process of normalization.

Bringing the symposium to a close, professor Ying Zhu, the founder and editor in chief of *Global Storytelling*, highlighted several key points emerging from the two-day symposium. Zhu reminded us how some of the new normals were indeed the continuation, if not perpetuation of, the old norms. Zhu illustrated the point with a Chinese saying: 旧瓶装新酒 (*jiuping zhuang xinjiu*, “new wine in old bottles”) but that the reverse is true during crisis: “old wine in new bottles.” She further proposed that crises such as COVID-19 reinforce and bring back old practices and existing class, racial, and gender divisions. In the time of digital storytelling where competing narratives coexisted, Zhu urged us to interrogate the notion of “norms, the process of normalization, and the forces behind this process.” Lastly, Zhu said that now more than ever, “[the] imperative to engage in cross-border, cross-disciplinary, cross-ideological, and cross-cultural boundaries has never before assumed a greater social, political, and cultural relevance.” The two-day symposium and *Global Storytelling* serve as a baby step toward the larger goal.

New Normal: Concealing Social Inequalities or a Beacon of Hope?

The symposium served as an opportunity for early-career researchers to present their work on and tell narratives about the new normal in its different historical and cultural contexts. Whether in times of war, economic collapse or slowdown, or pandemic, a crisis always triggers visions of a new way of life or social order. As Krzyzanowski explains, normalization ultimately leads to the development of forms of “common sense.” He further explains that media institutions and communication technologies play a vital role in the processes of legitimation, normalization, and the construction of common sense.¹⁷ Normalization always leaves the minorities out of the picture. As with the presentations by graduate students (i.e., Cao, Salaudeen, Lai and Liu, Panaligan, Nagar, Wei, and Sanyal), crisis and normalization do not work in the interest of the minorities, and in Krzyzanowski’s analysis of the refugee crisis in Europe, normalization can legitimize xenophobic discourses. In these cases, the new normal is illusory and maintains the status quo. It gives economic disparities and other social issues a facelift, but new normal preserves in its core old societal problems. If one thinks of the postpandemic future, one will be tempted to think of a world that is more fully integrated with mobile and digital technologies, as what the United Nations predicts will happen. Yet, one should also think about the material costs such vision demands. A fully digital world will most likely only benefit those who have the financial capacity, material resources, and access to digital infrastructures. We do not have to look further to assess how the new normal of the COVID-19 pandemic—that of social isolation, limited mobility, work-from-home arrangements—are imposed by governments and institutions without

17. Michal Krzyzanowski, “Normalization and the Discursive Construction of ‘New’ Norms and ‘New’ Normality: Discourse in the Paradoxes of Populism and Neoliberalism,” *Social Semiotics* 30, no. 4 (2020): 431–48.

taking into consideration the capacity of individuals to adapt. From gay men whose prospects for sexual contact were limited by the pandemic, to Indian women whose duties at home and work now overlap, to migrant students and workers in the United States who had to endure more solitary lives during this crisis, the imaginaries of new normal and a stable future do not really cater to the interests of the underprivileged and the minorities. In some ways, new normal hides—if not outright legitimizes, naturalizes, or worsens—existing social issues and social structures that buttress these issues.

Yet, crises also bring out narratives of resilience (e.g., Panaligan), the beauty of relationships (e.g., Li), and introspection on human values and the meaning of life (e.g., Lin). Crisis also have pockets of optimism where individuals can exercise their agency to help others and cultivate relationships. Crisis can also bring opportunities where we can reflect on the things that make us humans. Lin's presentation, for example, suggests that there are moments that our solitary existence during the pandemic compels us to think about our relationships, reflect on our lives before the crisis, and establish an emotional connection with others through digital media. As Zixuan Zhu implies in his presentation, the "new" in the new normal also carries its own meanings and imaginaries for everyone. In his studies on the emergence of interactive and online games with little narratives or story plots, Zhu hints that changes, and crises, provide opportunities for us to exercise our agency in new ways. Thus, crises can contain potential for people to challenge the status quo and initiate meaningful changes to the society. New normal can embody hopes and aspirations for deeper human connections and a future that is not only stable but also more just. Furthermore, the conduct of the symposium represented some positive changes. While the online symposium hindered more personal social interaction among the participants and the audience, it also allowed the symposium to be watched by many people outside Hong Kong. In this way, we hope that the symposium has reached more people, allowing them to be more aware of the different meanings and uses of the new normal.

Narrating New Normal has been a fruitful and productive gathering of minds that aimed to tell and critically examine narratives of new normal. Now more than ever, the phrase *new normal* has become ubiquitous, which means that it demands our attention as the phrase has become a buzzword for a stable future or a new way of life under crisis. While the presenters in this symposium tell narratives of how the new normal reinforces old social issues, there are also glimmers of hope that the crisis can also pave the way for a more just society. In its own modest way, Narrating New Normal teased out how new normal operates in various sociopolitical, cultural, and historical contexts and what concepts and visions of the past, present, and future this ubiquitous phrase embodies.

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