The year 2020 has been like no other – to borrow the dramatic title of a documentary narrated by David Attenborough, the natural historian, it was ‘the year earth changed’ (Beard 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted all aspects of our lives, and perseverance with our routine scholarly activities is no exception. Research productivity has been circumscribed, and this is especially the case with qualitatively oriented research; ethnography and fieldwork have been particularly hard hit, because of their high dependency on proximity as a foundational basis of data collection. Social distancing, being a key feature of containing the Covid-19 pandemic, has had substantial repercussions for these lines of qualitative inquiry. Qualitative research has for a long time been the poor cousin in healthcare research, and the pandemic will have very likely contributed towards marginalising it further. However, there are winners as well as losers: depending on one’s research priorities, one could be drowned in data, if mined through the media and social media networks, or one could find oneself in the midst of a data drought, if in-person, in-place data were needed to be collected via participant observation and/or face-to-face interaction with informants. Variable modes of access to research sites and research participants would no doubt affect what research questions can be posed and the pace at which one’s research can be carried out.

That the pandemic has affected people disproportionately has become a common theme. Disparities at the levels of access to healthcare and livelihood continue to be topics of public debate. Universal measures such as social distancing and self-isolation have not carried the same meaning for all those affected during the pandemic. Social distancing cannot be presumed as a norm across settings and relationships, not to mention crowded households. Likewise, self-isolation is not affordable in the case of families whose subsistence is based on daily work outside the home. More specifically, in the context of scientific inquiry, the Covid-19 pandemic has had disproportionate impact – both positive and negative – on the natural sciences and the social sciences, and within the latter the pandemic has surfaced the deep-rooted inequities across different traditions of qualitative research. A very basic condition such as access to people and places for participant observation and follow-up interviews has to be unwillingly suspended due to social distancing regulations, including travel bans. Travelling for conducting an interview is unlikely to be regarded as essential travel, although such interviews are integral to carrying out one’s qualitative inquiry.

In the case of a journal like *Communication & Medicine*, which thrives on dissemination of qualitative research, manuscript submissions – both in terms of quantity and quality – gradually dried up
during 2020. As an intervention strategy, through the journal's homepage, I issued an open call for manuscript submissions as follows:

**COMUNICATION & MEDICINE** is actively seeking submissions exploring the communicative and ethical aspects of the COVID pandemic, especially in the arena of public health and social media messaging as well as in interview accounts relating to themes such as risk, safety, culture of compliance, behaviour change etc. Proposals for full or half special issues (between 8 and 4 articles) can be discussed directly with the Editor.

This communique, not necessarily targeted at qualitative researchers, was sent to the journal's board members. Although I was not aiming for methodological contributions as such, David Silverman seized the initiative and sent me an article he was near to completing at the time titled ‘Collecting qualitative data during a pandemic’, which appears in the Forum Discussion section of this issue. He offers a fitting appraisal of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on qualitative research. He demonstrates how the pandemic has disproportionately affected different tribes of qualitative researchers, especially those conducting ethnographic research which incorporates fieldwork as well as face-to-face encounters as their primary source of data. Fieldwork thrives on the taken-for-granted assumption of ‘social proximity’, so ‘social distancing’ emerges as a real threat. The pandemic has hit hard those who conduct in-person, in-place ethnography and who now have to consider alternative ways of gathering data. When it comes to qualitative researchers going about their daily business, Silverman suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic has specifically affected junior and female researchers. Silverman’s piece is divided into problems and remedies,foregrounding alternative modes of data collection, including the possibility of reusing existing datasets, moving towards more text-based studies and optimising the affordances of the digital technology.

The digital turn in qualitatively oriented healthcare research predates Covid-19. It was always seen as a viable option for data collection, but has now gained the status of an imperative and therefore is consequential with the onset of Covid-19. Consider the recent call, in the UK, by the Medical Research Council (MRC), with the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) as co-founders, titled ‘Understanding remote approaches to qualitative health research’, which announces as follows:

Qualitative research is increasingly moving from in-person to virtual, online or remote approaches. Evidence-based approaches are required to understand where and how the design of virtual, online or remote qualitative data capture methods influences data value and research quality.

(UK Research and Innovation 2021)

Having read Silverman’s piece, I decided to offer an extensive platform for pursuing the discussion where other researchers with keen interest in qualitative methodology can share their ‘tricks of the trade’ during the Covid-19 era. Using snowballing, I contacted several people and a good proportion took up my offer to write brief commentaries. One can trace ‘for’ and ‘against’ voices in these commentaries. More importantly, many of the commentators push the discussion beyond Silverman’s remit, including ethical issues such as ecological standpoints embedded in digital data-collection procedures and practical issues surrounding the safety of researchers. As unintended consequences, on the positive side, digital data-collection methods would champion environmental friendliness (which amounts to gathering data without leaving any carbon footprints) as well as ensure a researcher’s safety away from strangers in doing data collection from the comfort of their home. If these commentaries were to be regarded as ‘data’ for further qualitative analysis, I guess I have been successful in gathering written data from a distance. A selection of the commentaries appears alongside Silverman’s discussion piece in this issue (by Rachel Grob and Jane Evered, Geraldine Leydon, Alison Pilnick, Fiona Stevenson and Sue Ziebland) and the remainder (by Rebecca Dimond, Frederick Erickson, Rick Iedema et al., Rodney H. Jones, Lindsay Prior, Johanna Ruusuvuori, Srikant Sarangi, Bernadette Watson and Fiona Wood) will follow in the next issue (Communication & Medicine 17.2).

Wearing my other editorial hat, pertaining to Text & Talk, I have been struck by the sheer volume of submissions featuring ‘Covid-19’ in the manuscript titles, with datasets primarily rooted in
media coverage and social media networks – with researchers once or even twice removed from ‘being physically present’ at the research sites. Although the pandemic has afforded huge opportunities for mining language/communication data in the public space, interest in public health paradigms, epidemiology, risk and safety, individual and collective behaviour remains tangential. The articles basically apply pre-existing analytical frameworks (e.g. corpus linguistics, critical discourse analysis, metaphor analysis) to Covid-19 data, which raises questions about whether discourse analysis as qualitative inquiry can be issue-driven in a practical sense during a crisis, or simply remains a rigorous methodological/analytical endeavour.

I take this opportunity to reinforce my invitation for further commentaries on methodological issues related to conducting qualitative research during the pandemic and self-standing empirical research addressing more substantive issues as outlined in the open invitation.

References

Beard, Tom, dir. (2021) *The Year Earth Changed*, narrated by David Attenborough. Bristol, UK: BBC Studios Natural History Unit.

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