

# Corona Fictions Database – Documentation of a Bibliographical Structuring System

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The Corona Fictions Database<sup>2</sup> is an essential part of the research project *Corona Fictions. On Viral Narratives in Times of Pandemics* funded by the Austrian Science Fund FWF (P 34571-G). The team members are Elisabeth Hobisch, Yvonne Vökl (project leader), Julia Obermayr, Tommaso Meozzi, Albert Göschl and Daniel Milkovits.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of the Covid-19 health crisis declared as a pandemic in early March 2020 (cf. Adhanom Ghebreyesus 2020), political and media discourse focused mainly on medical and economical solutions to thwart and contain the pandemic. The public, however, largely turned to cultural productions in order to make meaning of and to cope with this unprecedented event (cf. Obermayr/Vökl 2022a). The main purpose of the *Corona Fictions* project is to collect, categorize and analyze the cultural production resulting from this global pandemic, in regards to its social function and constitutive power determining how we perceive this extraordinary situation.

In order to understand the composition, compilation and functioning of the Corona Fictions Database, we describe in the following the corpus entering the bibliographical database, the process of data collection and structuring – including the specific challenges encountered in this process – as well as the functionality of the database.

## Corona Fictions

When the Covid-19 pandemic was declared, on the one hand, people started to consult existing 'pandemic fictions', meaning "literary and cultural productions, which rely strongly on the representation and functionalization of epi- and pandemics" (Research Group Pandemic Fictions 2020, 323). On the other hand, they started to produce their own narratives in diverse media to process these extraordinary experiences. Within weeks and months, authors and directors – professional and non professional alike – created and distributed countless diaries, anthologies of essays and poems, web series and music videos, often online.

Knowing that generally cultural productions not only document life as it is, but also determine and modify our view of the world,<sup>4</sup> the main objective of our open access database is to document Corona Fictions, understood as a constitutive factor of what people experience as the Covid-19 pandemic and as a future cultural heritage. Our main focus lies on the romance languages Spanish, Italian and French, but as the pandemic – according to its nature – is happening on a global scale, we are also inclined to additionally include cultural productions in other languages into our database.

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<sup>1</sup> How to quote this article: Hobisch, Elisabeth, Yvonne Vökl, Julia Obermayr (2023): "Corona Fictions Database – Documentation of a Bibliographical Structuring System." In: *zenodo*, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7529753

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hobisch/Vökl/Obermayr (2021-), [https://www.zotero.org/groups/4814225/corona\\_fictions\\_database/library](https://www.zotero.org/groups/4814225/corona_fictions_database/library).

<sup>3</sup> As our core team is constituted by literary, cultural and media science specialists, we want to thank our colleagues Bernhard Geiger and Denis Helic for their continuous support and advice from their computer and data science perspective during the development process of the Corona Fictions Database.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Nünning (2013, 40), as well as, the interdependence of representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation in Stuart Hall's (2011) 'circuit of culture'.

As Corona Fictions we define all fictional cultural productions stemming from and dealing with the time of the Covid-19 pandemic all the while recognizing that they represent a specific expression of crisis narratives. We deliberately chose the broader term ‘fictions’ over ‘literature’ because fictional works are distributed today in print, broadcast, and internet media. Especially internet media and their multiple media channels (e.g., blogs, YouTube, Facebook) are more and more permeating everyday life. Moreover, the participatory web invites for media consumers to become also media producers (cf. Schafer 2022, 184),<sup>5</sup> thereby broadening options for distribution of fictional cultural productions.

Although from their basic definition some genres’ intention, such as personal diaries’, is to be realistic documents of life capturing a specific historical moment or period, we decided to also include them and similar types of testimonial narratives into the Corona Fictions’ corpus. Since these published testimonial narratives are directed at an audience, we argue that any creator includes a certain degree of (auto-)fiction into their writing, singing or filming (cf. Völkl 2023).

## Compilation of Data

In order to detect *Corona Fictions*, we use the following strategies and resources.

On the one hand, we actively search for cultural productions on the internet using key words such as “lockdown”, “Covid-19”, “confinement”, “pandemic” etc. in the respective languages or established hashtags, such as #yomequedoencasa or #andratuttobene via platforms such as YouTube, Amazon, Netflix, but also library catalogues, websites of editorials or social media channels. Furthermore, we consult media with recommendations for reading and watching films or series, such as periodical articles on recent literature, literary podcasts and top-ten lists of film and streaming platforms.

Additionally, we also established direct contact with some producers of Corona Fictions, such as the author of one of the first Corona Fictions novels *Éloge du cygne [In Praise of the Swan]* (2020) David Chapon or the creator of the graphic diary *Diario de estar por casa, o ‘Mis conversaciones con un murciélago’ [Diary of Being at Home, or ‘My Conversations with a Bat’]* (2020) Fernanda Krahn Uribe.

On the other hand, we draw on the resources of our international project collaborators and citizen scientists. To enable their quick and easy participation, we set up an online Corona Fictions Data Survey,<sup>6</sup> which enables them to report Corona Fictions they come across back to us in a standardized way. Moreover, by means of science-to-public activities in the form of interviews,<sup>7</sup> exhibitions<sup>8</sup> or podcasts,<sup>9</sup> we intend to strengthen the outreach of our project and to motivate more interested citizens all around the world to contribute to our compilation via this survey. In

<sup>5</sup> Although in many definitions the participatory aspect of the publishing process on the web is considered a specific feature of “Web 2.0” from the year 2000 on (cf. O’Reilly 2005), Stevenson (2016, 1332, 1334) proves in his analysis that the public’s participation and the modelling of this sort of active participation is not a question of technology, but of a process of intentional construction and that it is already a feature of the web in the 1990s.

<sup>6</sup> We used the free and open source online statistical survey web app LimeSurvey for this questionnaire, which can be consulted under: <https://survey.tugraz.at/index.php/131911>, 2022-10-23.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Kremsberger/Völkl 2021; Siméone/Völkl 2021.

<sup>8</sup> A video of the exhibition entitled “Corona, sozialer Wandel und Resilienz [Covid-19, social change and resilience]” can be consulted under: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uXclRszDI4>, 2022-10-23.

<sup>9</sup> The podcast was recorded in the context of the Viennese podcast series *Fabulari. Der Wissenschaftspodcast zu Literatur und Film in der Romania* (Hiergeist et al. 2022-) and can be accessed under: <https://fabulari.podigee.io/19-neue-episode>, cf. Obermayr/Hiergeist 2023.

order to guarantee the best data quality, the results of the survey cannot be implemented directly into our compilation, but must be revised by our team members first.

## Regular Updates

Regular updates of the database are necessary because the Corona Fictions corpus is still growing. As the pandemic is not over yet,<sup>10</sup> we cannot limit a determined time span of it and, as a consequence, have to take into consideration the cultural productions appearing in 2020 (and maybe even from the end of 2019 on, when the virus already spread in China), but also in the subsequent years.

Hence for the duration of our project, the data included in our collection cannot be considered finished or complete, but will be in a continuous process. Therefore, we are constantly extending the corpus represented in the database while aiming for a technical solution that allows automated regular updates.

## Legal and Ethical Concerns

With our survey we do not collect any personal data, such as name or email address. The usage data collected automatically when filling out the survey includes the device's IP address only. This sole data inquiry was chosen in order to be able to make statements about the origins of the citizen scientists contributing to the survey. This means that no legal issues with data protection arise. As the data we manage in the database is purely bibliographical data, neither do we handle any material protected by intellectual property and author rights.

## Data Structure

For the basic structure of our bibliographical data we make use of an established reference management program.

After the first experiments with the bibliographical structuring program Citavi 6,<sup>11</sup> we changed to Zotero 6.0.8. Whereas Citavi needs high-priced, private or institutional licensing, Zotero, as a tool developed by the Corporation for Digital Scholarship,<sup>12</sup> is open source and completely freely available for anyone. This fact will also assure the long term data preservation and functioning of the database once the project has been completed or in case of institutional changes of the Corona Fictions team members.

One of the main advantages of recurring to an existing bibliographical structuring system is the established standard and the possibility of transferring, reusing and comparing data. It is not only possible to create bibliographies automatically, but to export selected items or a whole bibliography in a machine-readable and reusable format such as BibTex or csv. Furthermore,

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<sup>10</sup> Whereas the beginning of the pandemic can easily be identified by the WHO's declaration on March 11, 2020 (cf. Adhanom Ghebreyesus 2020), and the ensuing containment and mitigation measures taken worldwide almost simultaneously, in the process of our research the end of the pandemic is one recurring question. Who or what determines the „end“ of a pandemic? Is it the decreasing public interest, the abolition of measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus or will there be an official reclassification of Covid-19 as a seasonal disease? For now, all parameters are indicating that the cultural interest in the pandemic, and especially the social questions arising in its wake, will not end by an official declaration. Therefore, it is imperative to continue observing, collecting and analyzing the pandemic aftermaths not only on a medical, economical and sociological level, but also on a cultural level.

<sup>11</sup> Citavi was developed by Swiss Academic Software GmbH. There is a free version of Citavi which has a limitation to 100 entries per project. Many functions of the program are exclusively reserved for users of the purchased version.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Corporation for Digital Scholarship <https://digitalscholar.org/>

since the project team members are experts in cultural, literary and media studies and no experts in data science, the existing background structure of the data provided by the program and the possibility to use an existing user interface considerably facilitated the start of the compilation process.

Nevertheless, as most of these programs are specifically developed as a literature and reference management system for scientific research, our multimedia corpus represents a challenge to these systems. The predefined patterns and document types definitely lack an audiovisual perspective. Therefore, the data format is especially difficult to adapt to the bibliographical needs of new media forms, such as web series or music videos.

The functionality and usability of databases depends essentially on the quality of the data; meaning on the one hand, cleanness and data structuring, but, on the other, also clear and transparent classifications according to the needs and interests of the database users. Therefore, we dedicated special attention to the structuring and classification of our data.

## Special Challenges due to Corpus

Due to the fact that we are dealing with a contemporary multimedia corpus, it was especially challenging to define a comprehensive structure for the diverse formats of bibliographical data.

We were and are facing especially two issues: a) the coherent structuring of a mixed media corpus and b) the genre question.

### **A) Structuring Criteria and Terminology for a Mixed Media Corpus**

Each type of medium requires special data in order to be steadily identified and recognizable for researchers and the interested public. Whereas a reference to a book needs an author or editor, series and film references need data on directors, screenwriters and producers; references to publications in online magazines only include the date of publication, while music videos are usually quoted including the date of release and the date of consultation etc.

As a consequence, the predefined patterns for bibliographical references provided by the literature management programs were a useful tool and obstacle at the same time. In several steps of abstraction, the field experts of textual and audiovisual cultural productions had to get clear ideas as of which bibliographical elements were essential for the representation of certain types of media.

As a first pre-processing step, we started by dividing the Corona Fictions corpus into 'written' and 'audiovisual productions', describing the first with the Zotero document type "Book" and the latter with the Zotero document type "Film". For artworks such as paintings or games, we defined a third category by choosing the Zotero document type "Document". Regarding theatre productions, we first of all consider them as text, using the Zotero document type "Book" and distinguish between the printed dramatic text and the theatrical performance, which is marked as such with the tag "Performance". When it comes to terminology, we aimed at finding terms satisfying both, the requirements of written texts, as well as, audiovisuals, e.g. using 'creator' instead of author or screenwriter. This umbrella term also allows for the inclusion of other media formats such as web series and music videos, but also graphic representations.

## B) The Genre Question — Abstraction to Guarantee Searchability

The Corona Fictions in our database are created by a large variety of producers – professionals and amateurs alike – and stem from diverse cultural, linguistic and media contexts. Furthermore, intentionally or unintentionally, many Corona Fictions can hardly be classified into traditional media genres or are attributed very creative or multiple genre terminology by their producers, the marketing or in critiques. As an example, we would like to mention Rosanna Stark's 'smartphone film' *Monologik* (2020) or Tamar Guimarães' audiovisual production entitled *Soap* (2020), which was announced as 'telenovela', 'soap opera' and 'episodic movie', three very distinct serial genres on television (cf. Rizzo 2015, 57; Steirischer Herbst 2020).

The wide range of formats and genres resulting from this specific creative surrounding, represents another challenging aspect for the classification of the Corona Fictions. Just as other projects of documentation and data preservation did, we experienced that even specifically established typologies or classifications in certain areas are not able to capture and represent appropriately the cultural productions appearing in the digital realm (cf. Schafer 2022, 182).

Although from a scientific point of view we aim to provide the users with the most detailed and accurate information possible, from a classification point of view we need to focus on the lowest common denominator. Again, scientific expertise in the specific literary and media field is required to break down the enormous variety of genres to the main features to classify such a diverse corpus in the most suitable way. To assure the searchability of the data, we had to agree on a certain level of abstraction and a manageable number of categories.

### Classification Features for the Database

Although our main research interest lies on Corona Fictions in Romance languages, we agreed on **English** as the main interface language for the database. This choice guarantees us the best international outreach, without the exigency to add more language versions on the interface level, which in our area of research, the Romance studies, would result in a very extensive terminological detail work. Therefore, all classifications and tags are in English.

One main feature of a multimedia and multilingual database must be the possibility to select a **language** or **country** of interest. Although in most bibliographical systems, these features are not considered relevant, all document types in Zotero have the possibility to indicate a language. As a consequence, we only had to use the tag function to define the country. As our first version of the database is a Zotero Public Group Library, currently, we are still working on a more elaborated user interface including the possibility to adapt this basic data structure. Therefore, a search for specific countries is not yet possible by a drop down or a selection menu but has to be done by a tag search request. Nevertheless, for this particular case, Zotero offers a very convenient solution, as it allows for a selection of multiple tags by clicking on them (in lower left-hand corner of the interface), which equals a combined search request.

Another important aspect in our corpus is the **date**. Whereas in the digital realm, it is common to indicate the exact date of publication including day, month and year, printed books generally only indicate the year of publication. In order to facilitate the combination of these two traditions, we decided to use the format yyyy-mm-dd (e.g. 2020-04-27), which allows the chronological classification although not all data sets include all parameters.

The **genre classifications** (see above) had to be included in the tag function as well. As an example for the abstraction work the team members carried out, the following audiovisual

example has to be mentioned: we systematically decided to classify the corpus material by the genre/format “Film”, “Series”, “Music Video” and as another classification level to add the possibility to specify for example, by adding the attribute “Web” or “TV”. Therefore, it is not possible to search for “Web Series” but only for the combined tags “Web” and “Series”.

Similarly, up until now our corpus includes an unexpectedly large number of literary collections, such as anthologies of poems, theatre plays or essays. Therefore, we also decided to use the category “Collection” as an umbrella term, including the collection of works of several authors as well as the collection of works of one author, such as a diary or blog. The tag “Collection” can then be specified by further tags such as “Essay”, “Poetry”, “Blog” or “Diary”. Another common format in our corpus, the chronicle, nevertheless does not meet the criteria for a collection, which is why it has to be classified by the tag “Chronicle” on the first level.

Furthermore, within the textual Corona Fictions we find a large variety of publications with different lengths and narratological structures. As in our classification we cannot represent all of the variety encountered until now, we agreed on using the category “Novel” as an umbrella term for one coherent story in one publication or book, as it can be found frequently in children’s literature such as Schneider’s (2020) publication *Conni macht Mut in Zeiten von Corona: Eine Conni-Geschichte mit kindgerechtem Sachwissen rund um das Thema Corona* [*Conni Encourages Us in Times of Covid-19. A Story from Conni with Information on Covid-19 for Children*].

As a consequence, we defined two levels of genre/format classification:

1st level: “Chronicle”, “Collection”, “Essay”, “Film”, “Music Video”, “Novel”, “Series”, “Theatre Play”, “Game”

2nd level (specification/sub-genre): “Animation”, “Anthology”, “Blog”, “Comedy”, “Diary”, “Disaster”, “Docu-fiction”, “Documentary”, “Drama”, “Dystopia”, “Epistolary”, “Essay”, “Feature”, “Graphic”, “Haiku”, “History”, “Horror”, “Mystery”, “Performance”, “Photography”, “Poetry”, “Romance”, “Science fiction”, “Short”, “Sitcom”, “Stories”, “Testimony”, “Theatre Play”, “TV”, “Utopia”, “Visual Art”, “Web”

From the perspective of a scientifically coherent systematic, the challenges hereby are the following: the second level includes audiovisual formats such as “Web” to combine with first level term “Series” in order to search for web series but simultaneously includes termini for audiovisual genres such as “Documentary”, “Drama” etc. Moreover, some classification tags such as “Essay” or “Theatre Play” turned out to be necessarily applicable on both, the first and the second level of classification. We are aware of the limitations of this procedure, but due to the current technological restrictions, we were constrained to combine these two theoretical levels in one set of characteristics for now.

While, according to our classification strategy, each data set needs to be classified by a tag of the first level, the second level of specification is not mandatory. Nevertheless, it is also possible to choose several tags from the second classification level. For example, the collection *No somos islas. Cuento, Poesía, Narrativa y Ensayo sobre el COVID-19* [*We Are no Islands. Short Story, Poetry, Narrative and Essay on COVID-19*] edited by Samuel Parra (2020) is classified as “Collection” and specified with the tags “Poetry”, “Essay” and “Stories” as it includes these different kinds of texts.

Furthermore, in the case of collections, we decided to only refer to the collection as a whole in the database and not to every single contribution or element it contains, as contributions may be very short and duplicate entries should be avoided. In order to maintain this systematic, we also

apply it to audiovisual productions, such as series. In those cases, in which an established TV or Web format dedicated only some or even only one episode of their production to the Covid-19 pandemic, we agreed on including a remark on this matter in a Zotero note. For example, the French Netflix series *Plan cœur* containing a special episode entitled “Plan confiné.e.s” (2020-08-26) bears the supplement information: “This series includes the following episode(s) classified as Corona Fictions: S2 E15.”

In the course of the research conducted so far on the Italian, Spanish and French Corona Fictions, further **content related classifications** arose. As a consequence, in addition to the genre specific classification of the cultural productions in our collection, we developed further classification criteria on **Social Aspects** and **Pandemic Protagonists**.

On the one hand, contrary to our expectations, the Corona Fictions of the first year of the pandemic, rather focus on social life than on illness, disease<sup>13</sup> or the virus itself. Consequently, the sick body, symptoms of the disease and the virus have rarely or merely indirectly emerged in the cultural productions. On the contrary, the Corona Fictions artists describe, criticize and reflect on the impact of the mitigation measures in a detailed way, especially regarding the lockdown, physical distancing, border closures, as well as specific consequences for certain social groups and minorities, such as people of advanced age (cf. Moreno 2020) or people in long distance relationships (cf. Kercher 2020). Main subjects are also the difficulties to keep physical distance or the conflict between social and selfish behaviour in a state of emergency (cf. Obermayr/Völkl 2022b; Hobisch/Völkl/Obermayr 2022, 199).

Therefore, we classify the database entries with the following categories of social aspects.

**Social Aspects:** “Closeness/Distance”, “Fear”, “Gender”, “Health Care System”, “Hygiene”, “LGBT+”, “Lockdown”, “Loneliness”, “Motherhood”, “Social Class”, “Social Cohesion”

Another main finding of our research is the importance of the choice made by producers of pandemic narrations in regards to the protagonists of pandemic and Corona Fictions.<sup>14</sup> According to Stuart Hall’s (2011) ‘circuit of culture’ and the place representation takes in it, it is crucial who is represented in narratives and with what kind of social categories or communities (fictional) characters in diverse media can be identified. Although we were able to pinpoint historically consistent types of protagonists, such as the “Chronicler” and the “Doctor”, we observed significant modifications in the repertoire of protagonists in Corona Fictions in comparison to pandemic fictions. This applies, for example, to the role of women, who are much more present within the Corona Fictions corpus and contribute with a specifically female perspective to the current pandemic (cf. Hobisch/Völkl/Obermayr 2022, 204). Similarly, children are addressed and represented in special didactic fictional productions (cf. Universidad San Sebastián 2020; Schneider 2020). Moreover, the roles of scapegoats or suspects of (un-)intentionally spreading the disease, which were most likely adopted by representatives of minorities in pandemic fictions, are challenged within Corona Fictions (cf. Hobisch/Völkl/Obermayr 2022, 205).

**Pandemic Protagonists:** “Animal”, “Child”, “Detective”, “Doctor”, “Elderly”, “Essential Worker”, “Immune Protagonist”, “Librarian”, “Minority”, “Specialist”, “Woman”, “Writer/Chronicler”

<sup>13</sup> In the context of this pandemic, it is important to clearly differentiate the often synonymously used terms *illness* and *disease*. While *illness* refers to the personal experience of suffering, *disease* means the culturally constructed and medically classified combination of symptoms, which is socially accepted/legitimized and entails a diagnosis and a therapy (cf. Theriot 1993, 3; Zehetner 2012, 119).

<sup>14</sup> The insights gained by the Corona Fictions team members and many of our international collaboration partners on the subject of pandemic protagonists are to be published in June 2023, cf. Völkl/Obermayr/Hobisch 2023.

The cultural production in times of crisis and its echo in the public sphere are likely to reveal tendencies and tensions within a specific society. As observed during the first lockdown, for example, the 'lockdown diaries' by French authors Leïla Slimani (2020) and Marie Darrieussecq (2020) provoked an intense and black-hearted debate on social media, unearthing a deeply rooted hatred of the Parisian elite and bourgeoisie, as well as, misogynist attitudes within parts of society (cf. Obergöker 2020; Stemberger 2021, 42f.). The further course of the Covid-19 pandemic (management) and, thus, its incorporation into fictional narratives remains to unfold. Nevertheless, we are able to state that most likely it will do so differently according to the sociocultural circumstances of the producers and the audience.

## Results

As a first conclusion, the classification and structuring work carried out for this database allows to underline the importance of transparent classification strategies for a scientifically reliable data collection. As numerous platforms lack this type of documentation, resorting to classifications by popular media platforms or in advertisement texts is not recommendable. Although it seems tempting to just import data from diverse sources with a simple click, in spite of the shared technological infrastructure, the understanding of media formats varies greatly, just like classifications of genres do. As a consequence, to ensure data quality for further scientific analysis, the data provided by platforms and/or their users always requires critical examination and revision by specialists.

Due to the considerable workload resulting from data structuring for the Corona Fictions project, we decided to focus on the tasks of data quality, classification and structure for the time being. We built a reliable basis for the database and are now able to provide all the compiled information in an edited and classified way via a Zotero Public Group Library to the interested scientific community as well as the public (cf. Hobisch/Völk/Obermayr 2021-).

For now, we designed the data structure and classification in a way that will allow us – if needed it in the future – to extend the number of classification categories, but also to add a new sort of classification not yet predictable with the current state of research and the unforeseeable development of Corona Fictions.



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