#TogetherApart:
Mediatization, (Inter)subjectivity and Sociality at a Time of Pandemic

Edited by Bissie Anderson and Santhosh kumar Putta

Image: 'Let the distance be physical', created by Cristina Estanislao for UN's 'Global Callout To Creatives - help stop the spread of COVID-19': https://unsplash.com/@unitednations

Introduction

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It is a popular conception that the COVID-19 pandemic presents a caesura in the course of human history: an unprecedented rupture which brought what we considered 'normal life' to a halt, transforming the ways we live, work, and play. In our collective and individual struggles to overcome the disorientation the pandemic caused and as we look to survive "the cascading crises of the pandemic conjuncture" (Means & Slater 2021), we are being forced to pause and deeply reflect on the past, and to rethink what we had taken for granted (Harari 2020; Krastev 2020). Hoping to transition to a future of "collective solidarity" and a better "new normal" (Žižek 2020), we simultaneously recognize we are going through a period of heightened volatility. In this "interregnum of transitional ambiguity, if not chaos" (Ang 2021, 611), as we batter through the complexity of our historical moment, we oscillate between utopian and dystopian visions of the future, while subjectively "enduring COVID-19, nevertheless" (Adelman 2021). This endurance manifests in our continued 'labouring', in spite of the grim reality, to maintain some semblance of agency (however illusory) in a world of overwhelming uncertainty: "to invest all our pandemic labours – the doing, undoing, and not-doing – with meaning as a simple but undeniable record of persistence" (Adelman 2021, 470).

The one thing that we have found meaning in has been human connection, which, in conditions of social distance and what in many parts of the world has felt like a never-ending lockdown, has been possible through advanced digital media technologies. These "ecologies of communication through which human life is sustained" (Couldry 2020, 119) have turned into survival mechanisms for a large proportion of the world's population, as digital media proves indispensable in every aspect of our lives. As communication and sociality at a distance replace face-to-face interaction (Fuchs 2020) in the hope that relationships are sustained, symbolized by the popular phrase-turned-hashtag #TogetherApart, what role does "deep mediatization" (Hepp 2020) play in the COVID-19 pandemic? Will the new social distancing regime and the deepening mediatization of human life and communication further cement the supremacy of technology companies as critical material conditions for cultural practices and social life? How is mediatization changing (or not) personal and public communication, subjectivity, intimacy, and the ways we relate to others? These are some of the questions that inspired this special issue when the call for proposals went out in April 2020, as the world grappled with the new realities of COVID-19 lockdown.

Befitting the complexity of the pandemic conjuncture, this special issue features artistic and early career researcher contributions from a range of disciplines and cultural settings. As

guest editors, we are proud of the diverse nature of this special issue of *Networking Knowledge*, in which you will find a total of 12 contributions - academic articles, autoethnographies in the form of short film, collage, and prose-poetry, creative responses to these practice-based contributions, and an in-depth academic expert interview - by researchers and artists hailing from Australia, Bulgaria, China, Germany, India, Portugal, Spain, the UK and the United States.

Zheng Yang's contribution "War metaphors in Chinese digital media coverage of COVID-19" opens this special issue. Through a semantic network analysis of *The People's Daily* coverage of the pandemic on the social media platform Weibo, Yang examines how the public in China are interpellated using mainly "offensive" militarized metaphors "to mobilize and inspire enthusiasm among Chinese people, and to strengthen the Chinese government's control in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic" (Yang 2021, 9). The types of metaphors explicated particularly resonate with Chinese idioms from the national folklore (e.g., the concept of *Waixie*), thereby heightening their discursive and rhetorical force. While he recognizes that war metaphors are not a new phenomenon and are common in times of public health crises around the world, Yang argues that the overreliance on them, as discursive strategies, strengthens the paternalistic image of medicine, overemphasizes the obedience of publics to authorities, and undermines personal narratives of people who have experienced the disease. Yang stresses that, as humans, we must learn to live with epidemics and disease, which requires a more diverse stock of metaphors if we are to "rebuild a more harmonious symbiotic relationship between humankind and disease, health and nature" (ibid., 23). This echoes Ang's call for the need to reach beyond our "human horizon to address not just the global, but the planetary challenge facing us", including nature and all the living species on our planet in our visions of the post-pandemic future (Ang 2021, 612).

In the second article of this issue, Sara García Santamaría explores the relationship between the concepts of authenticity and left-wing populism through the performances of the intimate self of two iconic female politicians – Ada Colau (ACO), Mayor of Barcelona, and Alexandria Ocazio-Cortez (AOC), House representative for New York's 14th congressional district. The article uses a comparative case study design, critically analysing the two politicians' discursive constructions of self on Instagram through a visual rhetorical methodology. García Santamaría (2021) maps out the constructions of authenticity of ACO and AOC along four of the core dimensions of traditional rhetoric – *ethos, pathos, topos*, and *kairos*. The findings suggest that left-wing female politicians such as ACO and AOC perform authenticity through posting intimate details from their home lives and surroundings, and thus, construct an inclusionary self-image that revolves around "the notions of intimate and emotional connections with the publics (an element of people-centrism), and anti-elitism" (García Santamaría 2021, 45). In their lockdown Instagram activities, the two politicians were found to engage in complex code-switching between the personal and the professional, presenting themselves as both ordinary women and hardworking, caring politicians, which has enabled them to perform "a sense of virtual ubiquity that makes them more accessible to citizens and, especially, to those who might need their care" (ibid.).

In "Mediating close friendship intimacy in times of (social) distance", Jeannine Teichert explores how close friends negotiate their relationships from a distance through mediated communications. Grounding the study in the concept of "deep mediatization", Teichert (2021) examines three case studies of distanced close friendships in Germany, developing three core categories through a Grounded Theory approach to account for the different types of mediated intimacies found in the data: *distant intimacy, mediated everyday intimacy*, and *tacit intimacy,* respectively. These types of intimacy mediation are tightly interwoven with the media repertoires employed in the communication between the different groups of close distanced friends. Thus, for instance, in the case of *distant intimacy,* people can find it hard to form local friendships due to the strong emotional bond with their distant friend, therefore feeling "alone among strangers" (ibid., 57). Mediated communication is a poor substitute for this type of intimacy mediation, with face-to-face contact deemed more meaningful. *Mediated everyday intimacy*, on the other hand, is defined by friends sharing quotidian and trivial experiences with each other on instant messenger, thus continually renegotiating their close bond (ibid., 58). A third type of friendship negotiation - *tacit intimacy* - is achieved through more rare, asynchronous communication, whereby the friends are comfortable with the lack of face-to-face or everyday contact and instead, they trust the other person is always there for them (ibid., 59). Although a precursor to the pandemic reality, Teichert's study is pertinent to the 'new normal' of social distancing as it shows the different ways close friendships could be negotiated to overcome feelings of loneliness and maintain close connections.

Anastasiya Maksymchuk's autoethnographic exploration of the concept of mediated intimacy and presence is a personal account of experiencing the death of a close relative during COVID-19 when, due to the lockdown measures, many could not say a final goodbye to their loved ones in person. Maksymchuk's short film "The Paradox of Presence" (2021) poignantly conveys what it feels like to support a relative in their final hours, to witness death, via videocall, raising the question: What does it mean to *be there*? Maksymchuk further reflects on her experience in a socially distanced interview with Sasha Brovchenko, conducted via Zoom between Lisbon and Kyiv: "Some kind of rationality was guiding me. Maybe that was thanks to the distance, distance is always safe. It protects you from too strong impressions, too heavy emotions, too scary images; it filters and compresses them" (ibid., 71). In her creative response[1] Katherina Radeva (2021a) provides an interpretation of "The Paradox of Presence", sharing her own reflections on presence and distance as someone with transnational friend and family connections: 'Having "missed" family deaths and many births and many parties, I have often asked myself: "How can my empathy be present from such a vast physical distance?"' (ibid., 73). Radeva concludes that presence is, ultimately, care: a *shared experience* that involves "an active and informed choice to participate" and "listen deeply" (ibid., 74).

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[1] *Creative response* is a short format which is unique to this *Networking Knowledge* special issue. By deeply engaging with the creative contributions, creative responses enact a mediated dialogue between artists/academics. Symbolically recreating a circle of care, especially due to the personal and intimate nature of the ethnographies, these contributions imbue #TogetherApart with interpersonal compassion.

The theme of relationship negotiation is continued in Lauren Dempsey's contribution, which explores how friend-based, romantic, familial and professional relationships were maintained through computer-mediated communication during the first UK lockdown in 2020. Based on 18 semi-structured interviews with individuals in England, Dempsey's study (2021) found that her participants quickly became accustomed to computer-mediated communication, with online interactions almost completely supplanting face-to-face communication. The disruption to their day-to-day lives prompted the re-evaluation of participants' relationships and life priorities as they retreated to their personal home bubbles and appreciated the quality time spent with their families (Dempsey 2021, 79-80). However, the majority of Dempsey's study participants found the move from face-to-face to online communication challenging, some missing the comfort of routine interactions and activities, while others having to grapple with the novelties of 'home schooling' and juggling this with working from home (ibid., 81). A third group experienced social discomfort online (ibid., 88), and yet another group found themselves practising subterfuge as they were subjected to surveillance by worried relatives (ibid., 82-83), especially since, in the early days, there were conflicting public messages about how to keep safe and adhere to the pandemic rules. Dempsey concludes that, while computer-mediated communication was a lifeline for many, it was an inadequate replacement to face-to-face interaction and it felt unnatural to participants, pointing to the need to maintain the balance between mediated and face-to-face interactions in modern-day relationships. This conclusion echoes Fuchs (2020), who highlights the challenges of mediated-only interactions when it comes to intimacy: "You cannot hug someone over the Internet," Fuchs observes (396).

Lisette E. Torres' ethnographic art-based contribution "Digital contemplative community in pandemic times" explores the themes of relationality and collective healing. Echoing Means and Slater's observation on the conjunctural struggle to overcome "collective disorientation", and thus, "to articulate collective capacities and forms of agency" (2021, 520), Torres uses the medium of collage (Torres 2021, 95) to reflect on her Radical Dharma community gatherings and how they helped her "to (re)imagine community and connection during pandemic times" as a disabled Latina mother and scholar (ibid., 94). She positions her contemplation in the pandemic conjuncture, but also in the Black Lives Matter protests on police brutality happening at the time of writing/creation. Brought together by the "need to collectively mend" (ibid., 94), Torres' community's experience and its relational place in the conjuncture is embodied in the collage as a "virtual fugitive space" that "provides our community members a synchronous electronic experience of fellowship and love" (ibid., 96). Radeva's creative response (2021b) contemplates on the associations that the collage generates, especially in relation to time, which is experienced differently during the pandemic than before. Radeva argues that Torres' collage asks us to pause and "allow space for multiple ways of being, space to feel pain and space to heal", but also to "broaden our parallels of being" (ibid., 98). Ultimately, she argues, the collage "prods us into complexity and finding joy in the layers of history" (ibid., 99).

The theme of time and place carries through in "Ever-lockdown: Waiting through times of

playbour and pandemic in *Animal Crossing*", in which Merlin Seller critically explores the Nintendo game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* as a popular leisurely pandemic activity against the background of "neoliberalism's alienation, isolation and hyperconnected domestic digital labour" (Seller 2021, 100). Challenging popular axiomatic assumptions that the pandemic presents a historic break, Seller argues that *Animal Crossing* facilitates a "subtle, affective sense of place" amidst what they term "the ever-lockdown" (ibid.). Exploring the subtle 'affects' of the game and its atmospherics, Seller argues that its 'interpassivity' may be seen as a means to externalise and resist "our fantasy of pre-lockdown life" and thus, mediate our ever-lockdown anxiety (ibid., 110). "Pac[ing] back and forth through the weeds" (ibid.), Seller points out, the player relishes the experience of waiting, walking, and dwelling, and in so doing, resists conditions of digital capitalism such as alienation and playbour. With its "quiet, topian radicalism", the author argues, the *Animal Crossing* world is "an entanglement with continuities and the problematic gradual creep of our neoliberal ever-lockdown – enabling an interpassive response to our anxiety" about the progression of neoliberalism (ibid. 111). "This is not a utopia nor a dystopia but somewhere off the beaten path with the horizon always in our eye-line. In a world that disturbs and disquiets, ACNH is not a retreat, but a means of staying in place," Seller concludes (ibid.).

Donnalyn Xu's creative contribution "Transient Feelings" explores the "disorienting experience of navigating loneliness and intimacy in the digital space" (Xu 2021, 117). In her prose poem, consisting of nine stream-of-consciousness vignettes, she investigates the fragmentation of communication and intersubjectivity online, and the "tension between affective relations and isolation, where mediated bodies are troubled by longing, loneliness, and looking" (ibid.). The transience, and existential absurdity, of individual efforts to negotiate the human need for intimacy and relationality in the digital realm, is expressed by Xu in the following lines (ibid., 119):

> vii.
>
> all softness
> is defined
> by the presence of touch
>
> _____
>
> our relational bodies tell us
> how we are supposed to feel
> and i always feel it
> until i don't

In her creative response, Morven Gow mirrors the format of Xu's poetic contribution, further contemplating on the themes explored in Xu's vignettes, which, as Gow reflects, "describe the loneliness at the heart of a web of spun threads, seeking others to create a connective tissue of threads to build community in a human response to lockdown isolation" (Gow 2021, 121). Gow's creative response concludes with a message of hope – that despite the loneliness, isolation and dislocation in the digital landscape, there is emotion, connection, and love:

"Yet the digital realm is soul full, filled with eyes and ears eager to devour afresh images every minute of every day" (ibid., 124).

The final contribution to this special issue is an interview with Professor Andreas Hepp, of the University of Bremen, whose seminal work on mediatization and the mediated construction of reality has inspired this special issue. In conversation, we ask Andreas Hepp about his theory of "deep mediatization" and its relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the interview (kumar Putta & Anderson 2021, 125-130), Hepp reflects on the mediated construction, and the deeply mediatized experience, of the pandemic, the rising importance of media and data literacy in this reality, and why pioneer communities of practice, "through their experimental practices and imaginations, […] lay the ground for possible change" (ibid., 126) when it comes to shaping our mediatized future. He emphasizes the importance of process sociology and relational thinking for understanding intersubjectivity and autonomy and argues that we need "to look at the institutionalization and materialization of digital media as they currently exist" (ibid., 128) before we could ask questions about how to collectively re-imagine media infrastructures to reflect ethical values on a local and global scale. In conclusion, Hepp comments on the contributions to this special thematic issue, pointing out that they show the experience of the pandemic has been "deeply mediatized" (ibid., 129), and that they further scholarly debate on deep mediatization by making this experience "accessible for analytical reflection" (ibid., 130).

We hope that, in its multi-dimensional and multi-layered exploration of the impact of mediatization on sociality and (inter)subjectivity, this special issue has lent some form and texture to the popular pandemic phrase #TogetherApart. As we emerge from COVID-19 and enter a period of recovery, we will continue the struggle to reimagine, and re-orient ourselves in, a post-pandemic world. Our distanced, mediated experiences (individual, interpersonal and collective) will shape this future reality. The contributions in this special issue could serve as a snapshot of a critical juncture, documenting, through empirical, ethnographic, and dialogic explorations, the human condition in the pandemic conjuncture, and serving as a bridge between the pre-COVID past and the post-COVID "new normal", whenever that comes.

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War Metaphors in Chinese Digital Media Coverage of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

War metaphors have been found to be the most frequently used metaphors for conceptualizing diseases, epidemic and medicine. During the COVID-19 epidemic, war metaphors have been found to be widely used in both online and offline coverage. This study mainly focuses on how war metaphors were used in Chinese social media coverage about the COVID-19 epidemic. Using the method of semantic network analysis and the account of *The People's Daily* on the Chinese social media platform Weibo as an example, the findings show that war metaphors are widely used in the digital coverage of COVID-19. Compared with defensive metaphors and war process metaphors, offensive war metaphors are appearing much more frequently in digital coverage, and often with the use of national collective subjects. These two characteristics highlight how digital coverage uses militarized metaphors to mobilize and inspire enthusiasm among the Chinese people, and to strengthen the Chinese government's control in dealing with the COVID-19 epidemic.

Introduction

As a language tool to help people understand the external world and express our inner feelings, metaphors exist widely around people's daily lives (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Many scholars have pointed out that coverage of epidemics often relies on war metaphors, and such metaphors may have both positive and negative impact on public perceptions and responses to such epidemics (Wallis & Nerlich, 2005; Larson, Nerlich & Wallis, 2005; Nie et al., 2016). On the one hand, war metaphors are thought to help boost public morale and integrate resources to deal with emergencies more intensively, but on the other hand, excessive use of way metaphors has also been found to have the potential to cause unnecessary public panic (Wallis & Nerlich, 2005; Nie et al., 2016; Nie, 2017). China had seen a decline in the use of war metaphors in disease coverage before the COVID-19 outbreak (Yang, 2020; Sun, 2020). But during the outbreak, some Chinese scholars still found that war metaphors exist in a large proportion of COVID-19 coverage in traditional Chinese media, such as newspapers and television news (Sun,

2020). Reflecting on why war metaphors are widely used in the coverage of diseases, especially epidemics, some scholars believe that this stems from the long-standing 'biomedical' model for understanding health, and the binary opposition relationship between people and diseases (Nie et al., 2016; Nie, 2017). Relying on such war metaphors, it seems that people can deal with the relationship between disease and humans more concisely, that is, after simply 'eliminating' the disease, humans can 'reoccupy' health (Li, 2014; Jia, 2015). However, there has been little research about the use of war metaphors in Chinese digital journalism, especially on social media platforms. This study uses the account of *The People's Daily*, the biggest Chinese official newspaper, on Weibo, the biggest Chinese social media platform, as an example to explore the usage and characteristics of war metaphors in Chinese COVID-19 digital coverage. The findings of this research could help to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the reliance on war metaphors and their use in Chinese digital journalism during the epidemic in the rapidly developing Chinese digital media environment. Furthermore, combined with the understanding of the potential positive and negative effects of war metaphors for people to deal with sudden infectious diseases, the research findings could also help better understand how to use communication tools on digital media platforms to face future instances of sudden outbreaks of infectious diseases like COVID-19.

War Metaphors, Disease Coverage and Digital Platforms

Language has always been regarded as a powerful tool in health and the medicine field (Harrington, 2012, p.411). Metaphors play a non-negligible role when used as a language tool in such field (Hanne & Hawken, 2007; Harrington, 2012). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.3), a metaphor is a figure of speech that describes an object or action in a way that is not literally true but helps to explain an idea or make a comparison. Metaphors are considered not only to have cognitive functions, but also to participate in the construction of social existence (Nie et al., 2017). As a cultural and linguistic tool for conceptualizing diseases, metaphors have always had an effect on health communication in both doctor-patient interactions and media coverage (Fuks, 2009; Neilson, 2015; Wallis & Nerlich, 2005). Since humans began trying to understand the concepts of disease and health, metaphors have been used to help people understand complex, sometimes invisible, pathology, disease processes and treatment process (Annas, 1995; Neilson, 2015). Many studies have shown that the use of metaphors to describe diseases could help people to familiarize themselves with the concepts and experiences of diseases, and further effectively help them to understand the symptoms, diseases and treatment processes, and also produce patient-centred healthcare (Gibbs & Franks, 2002; Reisfield & Wilson, 2004; Casarett et al., 2010; Harrington, 2012). However, some studies still show that using inappropriate medical metaphors could also cause the public to have a wrong understanding and attitude

towards the disease, which also has a negative impact on the treatment process of the disease (Jobst et al., 1999; Reisfield & Wilson, 2004; Sim, 2008; Harrington, 2012). The media environment, especially the rapidly developing and influential digital media, may also magnify both the positive and negative impacts of metaphors on the public's perception of health and disease (Weinstein, 2003). Therefore, exploring and understanding the rhetorical features of the metaphors for health and diseases in the media environment could help us better control the influence of those metaphors. Especially in this special period of the global outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, understanding the metaphors used in the coverage of COVID-19 could greatly help us better respond to the epidemic in both sociocultural and medical dimensions.

Among all the metaphors used in disease expressions, especially in epidemic expressions, war metaphors have been found to be the most frequently used (Semino, 2008). War terms, such as '*enemy*', '*attack*', '*army*' and '*front*' have been found to be widely used to refer to diseases, patients, doctors, and responses to disease, especially during the epidemic outbreak (Wiggins, 2012). For instance, during the SARS outbreak, many war concepts were found to be widely used in both official coverage and public discussions, such as 'fight against the SARS epidemic', 'win the final victory in the battle against SARS', and the 'soldiers fighting on the front line of the battle against SARS' (Wallis & Nerlich, 2005). The widespread application of such war metaphors in the expression of diseases, especially infectious diseases, is considered to be closely related to the popularity of modern medical theories, especially bacterial theories. People tend to regard viruses that 'invade' the human body and cause illnesses as foreign invaders, and their own immune mechanisms as 'defenders'; The illness-process itself is just a battle between the virus as the 'invader' and immune system as the 'defender' (Baehr, 2006). Such an idea is similar to the traditional Chinese medicine idea that the cause of human diseases is attributed to 'external evil (*Waixie*)'. Therefore, under the dual effects of traditional Chinese medicine theories and the newly absorbed Western modern medical theories, the war metaphors have been also found to be widely used in the expression of diseases in the Chinese context (Jia, 2015; Nie, 2017).

However, as mentioned above, improper use of metaphors may have a negative impact on people's understanding and response to diseases. Although some studies have shown that using war metaphors can help strengthen the courage of patients facing disease, and also help society to coordinate resources, especially during the sudden epidemic outbreaks like SARS and currently, COVID-19 (Annas, 1995; Casarett et al., 2010; Fuks, 2009; Harrington, 2012; Nie, 1996; 2017), excessive use of war metaphors could also bring about some negative influences, such as causing patients to panic, strengthening the masculine, paternalistic image of medicine, weakening patients' discursive power, overemphasizing patients' obedience to medical authorities, and undermining patients' narratives of their personal experiences with disease (Jobst et al., 1999; Reisfield & Wilson, 2004; Sim, 2008; Harrington, 2012). This is because war metaphors tend to describe the relationship between the patient and the disease as a

dualistic relationship of 'Life or Death'. Humans and diseases cannot coexist in this metaphorical system (Radley, 2002; Cockerham, 2017). Some scholars even point out that "the ideological filter encased within the war metaphor is 'militarism', defined as a set of beliefs and values that stress the use of force and domination as appropriate means to solve problems and gain political power" (Kraska & Kappeler, 1997, p.2). Although there is no direct evidence that the war metaphor in the disease narrative will directly lead to the prevalence of 'militarism', according to Parsi (2016), excessive use of war metaphors is indeed more likely to cause further power inequality between those who control the discourse power in disease narratives, such as health policy maker or medical authority, and vulnerable groups, such as patients. Therefore, many current studies of disease narratives, especially those on the experience and narrative of chronic patients, indicate that humans should view disease from a more harmonious rather than opposite perspective, with richer metaphors (McCartney, 2014; Parikh et al., 2015; Wiggins, 2012). Some researchers even propose to use metaphors such as 'journey' to replace the important position of 'war' metaphors in disease expression and narrative (Semino, 2017).

Most studies mentioned above have applied qualitative research methods, such as discourse analysis, in the Western context. Few studies have used quantitative methods to examine the use of war metaphors in the Chinese context. And most existing research on metaphors of disease or epidemics also only focuses on traditional media content, especially print media such as newspaper and magazines (for example: Wallis & Nerlich, 2005; Kirkman, 2008; Kothari, 2016). Ample content space makes it easier for metaphors with cultural significances to be produced and represented in print media (Stephen et al., 2018). But in the digital media environment, which has quite different characteristics and affordances, current research on whether those metaphors are still as prominent as in the traditional media environment is still very limited. But some scholars have already pointed out that even in cases where the content space is very limited, rhetorical means, such as metaphors, have also been widely used in text expression and communication on social media platforms (Brems et al., 2017; Pihlaja, 2017). Digital coverage of disease and epidemics and discussion about illness, health and caring on social media platforms is believed to rely heavily on narratives or storytelling (Hardey, 2002; Orgad, 2005; Bers, 2009), and metaphors have been widely used in these narratives (Brems et al., 2017; Pihlaja, 2017). Therefore, although there is little empirical research analysing the widespread existence and expression characteristics of war metaphors in digital coverage about diseases and epidemic – especially on social media platforms – according to the above review (such as Bers, 2009; Brems et al., 2017; Pihlaja, 2017), it can be inferred that war metaphors are indeed widely used in electronic news and social media discussions about diseases and epidemics. Indeed, some qualitative research studies have already pointed out that war metaphors have appeared in descriptions of COVID-19 (although maybe not in the social media environment) and have profoundly affected understanding of, and responses to, COVID-19 (Gillis, 2020). However, as mentioned earlier, these studies are

almost all based on the Western context. What is the situation in the Chinese context? Are there extensive war metaphors for the COVID-19 epidemic in the Chinese environment, especially in digital coverage of COVID-19 on social media platforms? If so, what are the rhetorical and expressive characteristics of these war metaphors for COVID-19? And what positive or negative impacts might these war metaphors have on China's response to the COVID-19 epidemic? These are the research questions that this study aims to explore.

Methodology and Data Collection

As mentioned above, most previous studies on war metaphors used in coverage of disease or epidemics have been based on qualitative research methods, focusing on the traditional media environment, such as rhetorical analysis and frame analysis (Annas, 1995; Fuks, 2009; Casarett et al., 2010; McCartney, 2014; Parikh et al., 2015). The research on war metaphors used in digital coverage of disease or epidemics in the digital media environment, especially on social media platforms, is rare, as is quantitative research methods based on big Internet data. To make up for these shortcomings and to explore more comprehensively the characteristics of war metaphors used in digital coverage of the COVID-19 epidemic on Chinese social media platforms, this study uses the method of semantic network analysis.

This study analysed all the digital coverage of COVID-19 published by the official Weibo account of *The People's Daily* from 1st December 2019 to 27th February 2020. *The People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*) is the largest newspaper in China with a circulation of three million (Wu, 1994). On Weibo, the official account of *The People's Daily* is also the traditional media account with the largest number of followers and the most influence (Xu, 2014). In April 2020, *The People's Daily* had more than 1,200 million followers on Weibo. The daily average number of posts published by *The People's Daily* account during the COVID-19 epidemic on Weibo was more than 200, and it has become the most important online resource for the Chinese public to obtain information about COVID-19. The epidemic broke out in China in late November and early December 2019 and reached a peak around February 2020. Thus, the study uses data published from December to February as analysis samples. The three-month period should provide sufficient data for a robust analysis.

Using Python software to create a web crawler, 11,362,502 posts were collected via six keyword queries[1] based on the top trending coronavirus stories on Weibo. By mining all the content published by the official account of *The People's Daily* on Weibo, 16,178 posts were screened out as the final analysis database. Most of those posts are original posts (12,619, 78%); only 22% are retweets with comments (3,559). Since those retweets with comments also convey important information about the COVID-19 epidemic and reveals *The People's Daily* official account as China's national official

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[1] 新冠"、"新冠肺炎"、"新冠疫情"、"新冠病毒"、"新型冠状肺炎"、"新型冠状病毒"

social media account's attitude towards selecting information about COVID-19, it also has a social function as digital coverage. Thus, those retweets with comments attached were also included in the database for analysis.

This study uses the method of semantic analysis to explore whether war metaphors are obvious in the digital coverage of COVID-19 on Weibo and, if so, how the characteristics of such war metaphors are used in this digital coverage. Semantic network analysis is a research approach for visual text analytics using methods of network analysis to gain quantitative and qualitative insights. Through the co-occurrence of words, it presents a large amount of text in the form of a network, so that researchers can discover the semantic features of the text (Drieger, 2013). The traditional qualitative research methods for metaphor analysis based on in-depth reading are not well adapted to the big data characteristics of digital media environment. Therefore, the semantic network analysis of presenting a large amount of text data in a quantitative network form is deemed most suitable for the purposes of this research. The study involves the flowing steps:

(1) **Data collection from Weibo**, as discussed above.

(2) **Word segmentation**: Chinese word segmentation is the task of splitting Chinese text (a sequence of Chinese characters) into words. Different from the language of English, where the words in a sentence are naturally segmented by 'spaces', the language of Chinese is directly composed of continuous, uninterrupted Chinese characters. Therefore, the difficulties to determine how many individual words constitute a Chinese sentence has become a major problem in Chinese computational linguistics analysis. And it just so happens that metaphors, especially war metaphors in Chinese, often exist in the form of words. Therefore, if we want to use computational linguistic methods such as semantic network analysis to study war metaphors in Chinese, we first need to segment the Chinese text we have collected. To achieve this, *Jieba*, a Chinese text segmentation module based on Python, was used to conduct such tasks (Liu et al., 2018).

(3) **Semantic network analysis**: After word segmentation, all the sample texts are processed into the analyzable data in sentence units consisting of divided words. Further, by deleting some words that appear frequently in the database but have no practical meanings, such as conjunctions, function words, modal particles, etc., the final analysis text data is obtained. All the final data has been imported into the network and visualization analysis software: Gephi 0.9.2 to get the final semantic network. In the semantic network, each single word will be regarded as a node, and two words

appearing together in a sentence will be regarded as a relationship (line). Thus, an undirected network based on word co-occurrence in all the posts about COVID-19 epidemic published by *The People's Daily* on Weibo from 1st December 2019 to 27th February 2020 could be constructed.
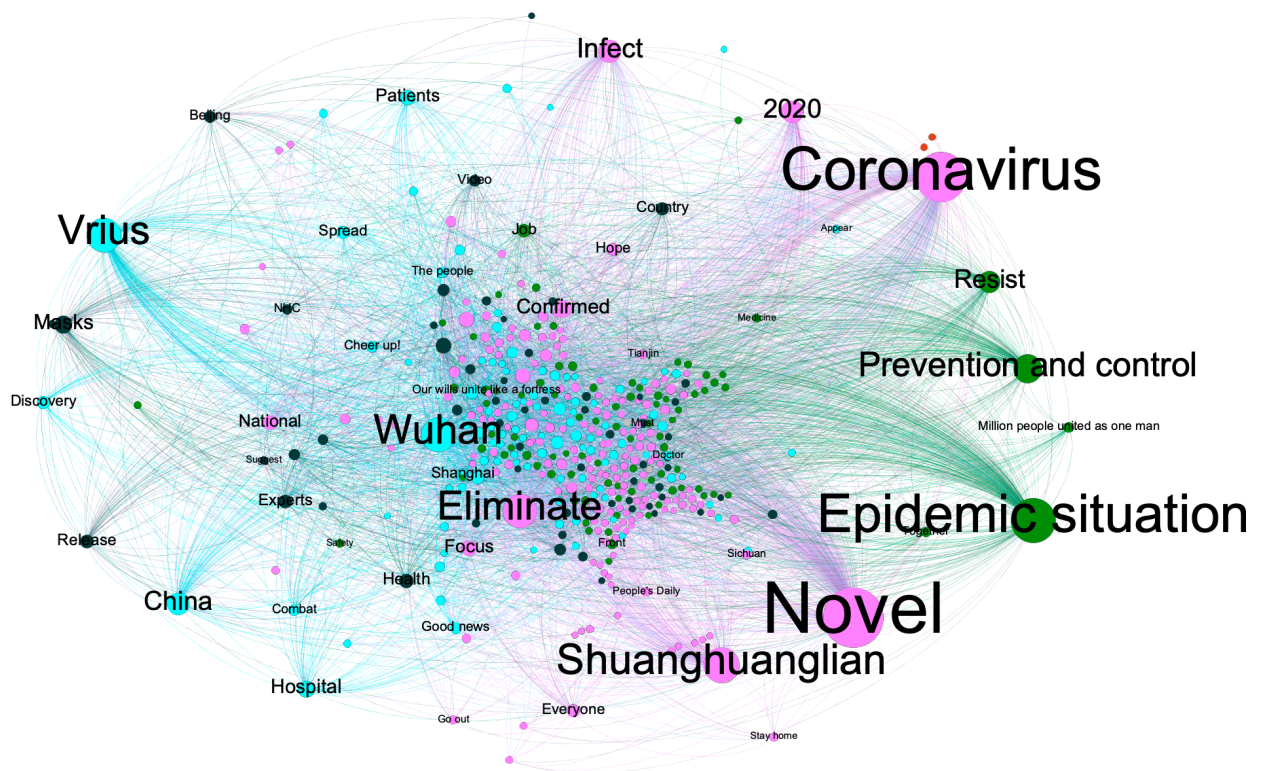
Analysis and Findings

Figure 1. Visualization result of semantic network analysis

Through the semantic analysis of all the posts about COVID-19 published by *The People's Daily* on Weibo during the three-month sample period, a semantic network was constructed (Figure 1). In the network, each node represents one word. Due to the huge number of nodes (more than 20,000), the nodes with a degree of less than 50 were filtered out, which means the centrality of the words represented by those nodes in the network is less than 50 (i.e., it is not very significant in the whole semantic network). The sizes of the nodes in this network represent the degree of each node. Only the top 50 nodes with the highest degree have been shown with labels. The colours here indicate clusters, which means nodes with the same colour tend to appear in the same or similar sentences.

Widespread war metaphors in Chinese digital coverage of COVID-19

Through the visualization result of semantic network analysis (Figure 1), some war terms are clear in this network, such as 'eliminate' (*Xiaomie, 消灭*), 'prevention and control' (*Fangkong 防控*), 'resist' (*Diyu 抵御*), 'combat' (*Zhandou 战斗*) and 'front' (*Zhanxian 战线*). Since only the top 50 nodes with the highest degree have been shown with labels in this network, the visible war words in this semantic network are thus widely used in the digital coverage of COVID-19 by *The People's Daily* on Weibo. For instance, in the following example, *The People's Daily* described the management and response to COVID-19 as 'the front of fighting with the epidemic', and a policeman who died at work responding to COVID-19 is also described as a battle hero (Figure 2; the face of the policeman has been obscured).
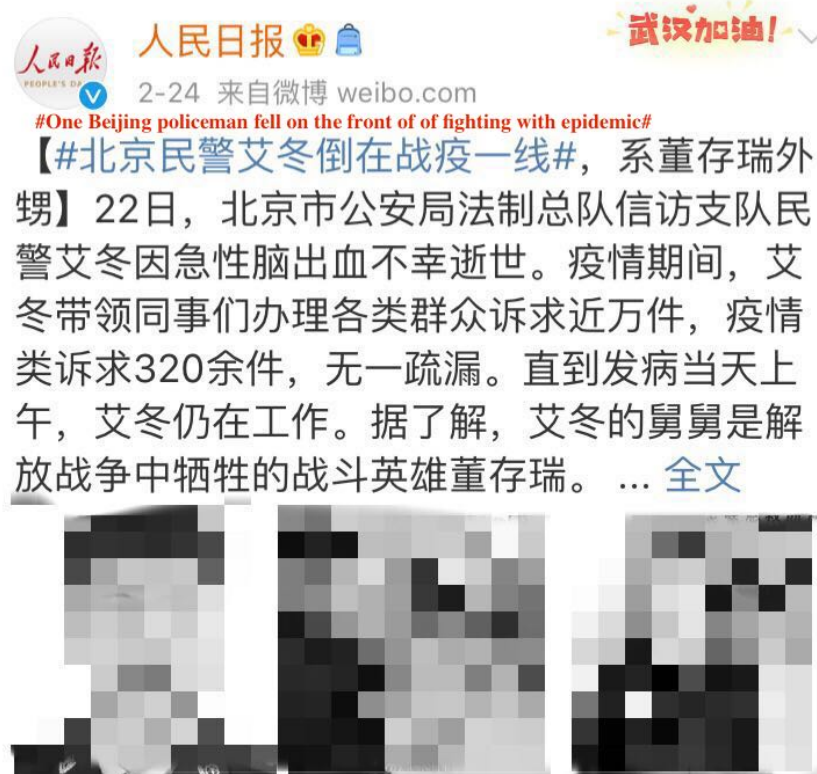

Figure 2. Example of digital coverage with war metaphors by *The People's Daily* on Weibo

Except for these individual war words which are similarly used in war metaphors for medicine in a Western context (Fuks, 2010), there are still some war expressions with Chinese characteristics and proverbial nature that are widely used by *The People's Daily* in reporting about COVID-19 on Weibo, such as 'our wills unite like a fortress' (*Zhongzhichengcheng 众志成城*) and 'million people united as one man' (*Wanzhongyixin 万众一心*). These two idioms are believed to originate from ancient

battlefields and are considered to be the most commonly used militarized idioms in China today to inspire people to have a positive attitude towards a particular subject, also called 'morale' (*Shiqi* 士气) (Shi et al., 1982). Similarly, on Weibo, *The People's Daily* also frequently used these two war idioms in its digital coverage of COVID-19 and related matters. For instance: "we must resist this battle like million people united as one man, so that we can win the final victory" (*The People's Daily*, 01/02/2020) and "the Chinese people's wills unite like a fortress and have achieved major strategic results in the fight against the COVID-19 epidemic" (*The People's Daily*, 25/02/2020).

The analysis above, based on the visualization results, shows that war metaphors were widely used in the digital coverage of COVID-19 by *The People's Daily* on Weibo. To obtain more accurate analysis results, the degree of the node and weight of edges is used as an indicator to list the 50 words with the highest degree. Table 1 shows that, in the topic of 50 words with highest degree, there are eight words (in italics and bold) with obvious militarized language features. Among all language possibilities, war language, as a special rhetoric technique, accounts for 16%. This also shows that as a special rhetorical technique, war metaphor occupies a very obvious proportion in digital coverage of COVID-19 which could have multiple rhetorical possibilities. At least as far as the types of metaphors are concerned, no other metaphor types with a higher proportion appear among the 50 words in the highest degree. This indicates that war metaphors are indeed widespread in the digital coverage of COVID-19 by *The People's Daily* on Weibo.

Table 1. Top 50 words with highest node degree in the semantic network

Word	Degree	Word	Degree	Word	Degree
Health	2501	Wuhan	246	Confirmed	150
Shuanghuanlian	1461	***Combat***	244	Stay home	143
Coronavirus	1148	Country	238	Go out	139
Novel	733	***Prevention and control***	235	Sichuan	136
2020	645	Infect	235	Patients	136
China	493	Experts	235	Must	136
Epidemic situation	427	Shanghai	218	People's Daily	132

Masks	381	Cheer up	211	Tianjin	128
Eliminate	365	Beijing	202	***Conquer***	125
<u>National</u>	352	Virus	194	***Battle***	125
Focus	337	**<u>Together</u>**	187	Appear	125
Hospital	326	Spread	187	NHC	123
Job	297	***<u>Million people united as one man</u>***	187	Medicine	123
<u>Everyone</u>	297	**<u>The people</u>**	176	Video	121
Release	290	Discovery	176	Safety	121
<u>Our</u> wills unite like a fortress	273	***Front***	165	**<u>The public</u>**	119
Hope	264	Good news	150		

Aggressively offensive metaphors in Chinese digital coverage of COVID-19

According to some Chinese scholars, Chinese war metaphors can be divided into three categories: **offensive** metaphors (such as eliminate, conquer, battle, resist control and combat); **defensive** metaphors (such as defend, defence, resist, and guard); and **war process** metaphors (such as solider, quartermaster, strategy, tactics, victory, morale and front). Among these three categories, offensive and defensive metaphors were more commonly used in the representation of diseases in China (Jia, 2015; Yang & Dong, 2017). Among the eight most used war words shown in Table 1, four are offensive war metaphors, two could be defined as defensive war metaphors, and two could be identified as war process metaphors (Table 2).

Table 2. Different categories of war metaphors used in digital coverage of COVID-19 by *The People's Daily* on Weibo

Metaphor categories	**Words**	**Degree**	**Sum of Degree**

Offensive war metaphors	Eliminate	365	859
	Combat	244	
	Conquer	125	
	Battle	125	
Defensive war metaphors	Our wills unite like a fortress	273	508
	Prevention and control	235	
War process metaphors	Million people united as one man	187	352
	Front	165	

Table 2 shows that offensive war metaphors not only occupy a prominent position in the number of words but are also higher than the other two categories of war metaphors in the sum of node degrees. This indicates that offensive war metaphors are used more frequently in the digital coverage of COVID-19 by *The People's Daily* on Weibo than defensive war metaphors and war process metaphors. The tendency to use offensive words in war metaphors could be related to Chinese people's understandings of disease. As mentioned above, according to the traditional Chinese medical theories, diseases are caused by external substance (*Waixie*) invading the human body. Therefore, the process of curing diseases is the struggle between the righteous energy (*Zhengqi*) in the body and such external substance (*Waixie*). As long as the righteous energy (*Zhengqi*) overcomes the external substance (*Waixie*) and harmony (*Hexie*) overcomes the disorder (*Butiao*), the human body will be restored to health (Veith, 1997). Such understanding is further combined with the Western medical concepts introduced into China in modern times, especially with the bacteria theory. It is believed that only by "repelling" and "eliminating" viruses and external substance (*Waixie*) that invade the human body can humans overcome the diseases, especially the infectious ones (Rin, 1965). This idea was evident during the outbreak of COVID-19 in China. Almost all coverage of COVID-19 tends to portray the virus as an 'evil' virus that invades the human body from the outside world (Shao & Ye, 2020). Furthermore, because this virus may be related to the Chinese people's consumption of wild bats, many online discourses link the COVID-19 virus with the terrible image of bats and 'evil animal revenge'[2].

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[2] Examples of such internet discourse include:
https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1659047264175634903&wfr=spider&for=pc (Title: COVID-19 is a means of revenge from nature) and http://k.sina.com.cn/article_6196100187_17150fc5b00100t6ha.html (Title: During COVID-19 and Australian wildfires, bats all play an evil role, can humans eliminate them?)

Offensive war metaphors are believed to have positive social effects in bringing together members of society, mobilizing their enthusiasm, and inspiring people to deal with a specific matter together. As a result, they are found to be widely used in coverage during the outbreak of sudden infectious diseases. In comparison, China's coverage of the SARS outbreak was found to have prominent offensive war metaphor features (Li, 2014). Chinese scholars believe that these metaphors had positive social effects in mobilizing national strength and boosting the morale of the Chinese people to deal with SARS. In the contemporary Chinese situation, in which uniting a collective power against a demonized disease is emphasized, the coverage is also inclined towards an offensive rather than a defensive vocabulary in war metaphors related to the disease. But whether it still plays a positive social role as it did during the SARS outbreak requires more profound and long-term social research to determine.

Collectivism and war metaphors in Chinese digital coverage of COVID-19

From the semantic network and the top 50 words list, another phenomenon is clear: unifying and collectivizing terms referring to the united Chinese people are widely used in the digital coverage of COVID-19 by *The People's Daily* on Weibo, including 'national' (*Quanguo* 全国), 'everyone' (*Meigeren* 每个人), and 'the public' (*Dazhong* 大众) (Table 3). There are only two subjects referring to specific groups: experts and patients. According to the sum of node degree of the two different subject categories, the collective subjects referring to the people of the whole country dominated the mainstream. Some scholars note that, in war actions, regardless of the participants' original social identities, they take on the unified identity of 'fighter'. Therefore, in war terms, the collective expression of subjects such as 'the whole of us', 'all the people' and 'all nationals' are widely used (Hall, 1999). This is also significant in China when facing the COVID-19 outbreak. When war metaphors are used, social identities are erased, and all subjects are considered part of a homogeneous unified collective (Cohen, 2011). Thus, during the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic in China, where the war metaphors are widely used in the Chinese digital coverage on Weibo, the subjects of most actions are collective, such as 'the public' and 'the people'.

Table 3. Different categories of subjects used in digital coverage of COVID-19 by *The People's Daily* on Weibo

Subject categories	Words	Degree	Sum of Degree
Collective subjects	national	352	1591
	everyone	297	
	our	273	

	together	187	
	million people	187	
	the people	176	
	the public	119	
Specific subjects	experts	235	371
	patients	136	

The collective subjects widely used in the digital discourse of COVID-19 erase the differences between various groups of people facing the epidemic and instead give them a similar social role: 'warriors' or 'soldiers' fighting against the epidemic. For example: "China's fight against the COVID-19 epidemic is a miracle in the history of human struggle against the disease. This is a test for all the Chinese people and a battle for all the Chinese people" (*The People's Daily*, 27/02/2020). Applying a soldier's identity to all the Chinese people further transforms the government's advice on the behaviour of Chinese citizens facing the COVID-19 epidemic into a war order, such as insisting that they must 'stay home', must wear a 'mask' and never 'go out'.

In the present study, the relationship found between war metaphors and the collectivization of subjects used in the digital coverage of COVID-19 on Weibo points out that it is necessary for us to rethink the influence of war metaphors in how COVID-19 is understood in the Chinese digital media environment. As discussed above, war metaphors have some positive social functions when dealing with diseases, especially epidemics: integrating social resources and encouraging public morale to cope with sudden diseases such as SARS, as well as the current COVID-19 epidemic (Annas, 1995; Fuks, 2009; Casarett et al., 2010; Harrington, 2012; Nie, 1990; 2016). Such social functions may be closely related to the use of collectivized subject pronouns. Nie et al. (2016) observed that "war metaphors for disease may help to enhance the morale of patients and health care professionals alike with respect to the healing process, especially when the problems involved are serious and life-threatening, and they may also help the whole society to mobilize human, economic, and social resources for healthcare and medical research to face sudden infectious diseases" (p.5). However, the over-emphasis on homogenous, collectivized subject pronouns in the influential digital coverages of COVID-19 on Weibo may also neglect the social identities and characteristics of the different Chinese groups to some extent and impose more social responsibility and collective social identities on the Chinese public facing the COVID-19 epidemic.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Limitations

The findings from the analysis above show that war metaphors are widely used in the digital coverage of COVID-19 on Chinese social media, taking the account of *The People's Daily* on Weibo as an example. Compared with defensive metaphors and war process metaphors, offensive war metaphors more readily appear in this digital coverage, and further, often with the use of national collective subjects. These two characteristics of the use of war metaphor in the digital coverage of COVID-19 highlight the situation that such coverage aims to use militarized metaphors to mobilize and inspire the enthusiasm of the Chinese people across the country and strengthen the control of China's government in dealing with the epidemic. This is not just characteristic of China's coverage in the face of COVID-19 (Gillis, 2020; Craig, 2020; Jetly et al., 2020), but the metaphors used show some obvious Chinese national folklore characteristics, such as treating COVID-19 as an evil virus that invades the human body (*Waixie*), employing idioms with Chinese characteristics to strengthen the expression of these war metaphors.

As discussed at the beginning of this article, many studies on the use of war metaphors during the outbreaks of epidemics, such as SARS and COVID-19, have pointed out that those war metaphors can strengthen the courage of the public in the face of disease, and they can help society to coordinate resources in coping with such sudden outbreaks (Annas, 1995; Casarett et al., 2010; Fuks, 2009; Harrington, 2012; Nie, 1996; Nie et al., 2016; Gillis, 2020; Craig, 2020; Jetly et al., 2020). But we also need to reflect on some of the disadvantages that may be brought about by the excessive use of militarized metaphors. The over-reliance on militarized metaphors may cause the public to panic, strengthening the masculine, paternalistic image of medicine, weakening patients' discursive power, overemphasizing the public's obedience to medical authorities, and undermining the public's narratives of their personal experiences with disease (Jobst et al., 1999; Reisfield & Wilson, 2004; Sim, 2008; Harrington, 2012). As this study mainly focused on quantitative network data, further studies are needed to explore the negative consequences that the excessive use of war metaphors may bring. For understanding metaphors and their socio-cultural functions, qualitative data can bring some deeper insights. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods in future studies could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the use of war metaphors in digital coverage of diseases.

To sum up, according to the semantic analysis in this study, the war metaphor has already become the most obvious and dominant rhetorical expression. Other types of metaphors are almost invisible in the semantic network. Many scholars have already emphasized that when facing some chronic diseases, a softer and harmonious symbiosis metaphor is needed to construct our relationship with disease, health and medical care, such as a 'journal metaphor' (Nie et al., 2016). In the face of COVID-19, China has already achieved an initial victory, and the relationship with COVID-19 is now no longer as extreme and intense as it was in early 2020. The Chinese people eagerly hope to return to normal daily life without strict 'militarized' control. Just as Zhang Wenhong, director of the Department of Infectious Diseases, Huashan Hospital, Fudan

University (who was awarded a national commendation for his outstanding contributions in the face of the COVID-19 epidemic) said, in the long run, humans do not have the conditions to eliminate COVID-19. From the perspective of the whole of China and the wider world, there should be a state of symbiosis between the people and the COVID-19 virus (Zhang, 2020). Therefore, in the post-epidemic era, with the epidemic stabilizing, we need multiple metaphors other than just war metaphors – not only in China, but across the world – to help us cope with the new relationship between humans and COVID-19, which appears to be here to stay, and to help us rebuild a more harmonious symbiotic relationship between mankind and disease, health and nature.

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Biography

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Politicians "Stay Home": Left-Wing Populism and Performances of the Intimate Self on Social Media During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the intimate space of politicians at home during lockdown through their personal Instagram accounts, using both live stories (which I have been saving daily), posts and captions. More precisely, it focuses on two young female politicians who have become iconic for left-wing movements around the world. They are Ada Colau, Mayor of Barcelona (Spain), and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, representative for New York's 14th congressional district (USA). As previous political outsiders who belong to a left-wing populist wave, AOC and Colau interact with their followers in "an authentic way", often posting very intimate and apparently uncurated images of their daily life. The goal of the paper is to examine how they construct authenticity and connect with their constituencies during the COVID-19 lockdown through a qualitative visual rhetorical analysis.

KEYWORDS:

Authenticity, intimacy, personalisation, left-wing populism, COVID-19, Instagram, visual rhetoric

Introduction

The latest note on my research diary reads: "AOC shares #DecoOfTheDay pic". For those who are not familiar with the intimate life of American congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Deco is her dog, and she shares regular pictures of him on Instagram. It is not that her dog is her main worry during COVID-19 lockdown but, working from home, it seems hard to go on with politics as usual. That is why some leaders seem to let go the political pose and share the intimacies of their home for the delight of the audience. Those who do not have a dog might have kids, and Ada Colau in Spain shows regular pictures of hers on social media.

The examples above bring about many questions about the personalisation of politics in the digital era: How do politicians use their social media accounts as a way of connecting with regular people, bypassing what Bourdieu (1984) calls the "bourgeois taste" of the political elite? What is the interplay between personal disclosure and authenticity? These questions are essential for understanding the role that intimate posts play in shaping politicians' social media image, and how apparently apolitical images connect to their ideological goals.

This paper aims at examining the intimate life of politicians while working at home during COVID-19 lockdown through their Instagram posts More precisely, it examines the ways in which left-wing populist leaders self-represent themselves from home, (inevitably) showing glimpses of their most intimate space. The underlying idea is that they present themselves as authentic and approachable leaders who can be trusted through a combination of rhetorical devices that examine their personality (ethos), their emotional connections with loved ones (pathos), as well as their personal management of personal space (topos) and time (kairos). The time frame goes from March 11th, 2020, when the World Health Organisation declares COVID-19 a pandemic, to June 21st, 2020, when both Barcelona and New York (one day later) start easing lockdown restrictions.

The paper takes a comparative case study approach, analysing two young female politicians who were previously political outsiders and have become referents of left-wing populism around the world (Rasulo 2020, García Agustín 2020b, Portapan et al. 2020, Sintes-Olivella, Casero-Ripollés and Yeste-Piquer 2020). They are Ada Colau (referred to as ACO, *Barcelona en Comú*, Spain), Mayor of Barcelona, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (referred to as AOC, Democratic Party, United States), representative for New York's 14th congressional district. This perspective contributes to broadening existing knowledge about "other" populisms by focusing on two female politicians who combine a strong sense of locally rooted activism with left-wing populist discourses and aesthetics.

Literature Review

As social media become key platforms for connecting politicians with their audiences, political leaders are experimenting with intimate posts that e/affectively mobilise their followers, since the remembrance of a familiar experience, such as petting your dog, creates emotional bonds that tie citizens and leaders together in communities of feeling (Yl¨a-Anttila 2006). While politicians keep sharing posts of what they love, and who they love – many of them going viral, we still lack a comprehensive framework and a systematic analysis of a common yet poorly theorised phenomenon in political communication. This is due to the novelty of the phenomenon, but also because research on populist communication, online performances of authenticity and the intimisation of politics remains scattered. The following lines will examine these three strands of research, trying to establish a link between them.

Contemporary populist waves play out in a context of a general decline in citizens' trust in traditional institutions (Enli and Rosenberg 2018), such as political parties and media outlets, both contested in a hybrid communication system (Chadwick 2013). By presenting themselves as political outsiders, "authentic" populists appear as not yet polluted by politics, its rules, and its perceived fakery. In Canovan's (2005, 5) words, "populists may have a bad name (at any rate in Europe) but their trump card, the belief in popular sovereignty, lies at the heart of democracy itself".

When discussing populism, it is important to differentiate "commonsensical" from "theoretical" understandings (Howarth 2015, 13). Even in academic works, the analysis of populism is often based on one of its many variants, right-wing populism. These reductionist, "generic" (Tushnet 2018) and de-historicised (Gandesha 2018) approaches extend the potential threats of right-wing populism to all forms of populism. In consequence, the search for understanding populism across ideologies has done nothing for unraveling the differences between right- and left-wing strands, argues García Agustín (2020a). Neither has done the quest for "pure" forms of populism. In fact, all populism is hybrid, and involves a constant interaction with other sedimented political traditions (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). In the literature, left-wing populism has been seen as the exception (Salmela and von Scheve 2018) and this has produced a gap in knowledge and lack of understanding of how progressive populist leaders construct a closeness with the people (Sintes-Olivella 2020).

Discursive and ideational conceptualisations of populism have been often used interchangeably. The common denominator of labelling populism a political "*style*" (Waisbord 2013, Moffit 2016), "*discourse*" (Laclau 2005) or "*thin-centred ideology*" (Mudde 2004, Blassnig et al., 2018, Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, Engesser et al. 2017) is that all these concepts stress a vision of populism as a set of political ideas that can be performed both discursively and aesthetically (Dupuy 2002, Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, Sunnercrantz 2019). However, the discursive approach questions populism as an "either-or phenomenon" reserved to politicians we perceive as being populist (Bennett et al. 2020). Instead, it conceptualises populism as a discursive articulation of "the people" that can be present in all political communication, to a certain degree. Populism, in this paper, is used as an analytical tool, not as a defining characteristic of a leader or a party. Conceptualisations of populism as a logic of discursive articulation draw on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1984) discourse theoretical approaches.[1] Simply put, "populist articulations create an image of the speaker as a saviour of the people speaking on behalf of the people against its enemy – in contrast to untrustworthy politicians" (Sunnercrantz 2019).

In the literature, it is common to define populism around two elements: people-centrism and anti-elitism. In Laclau's (1977 167) words, what transforms discursive appeals to people into populism is "the people/power contradiction": us, the people versus them, the establishment (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014, Gandesha 2018). In populism, "the elite" is often discredited and delegitimised through negative attributes that expose it as distant and unresponsive to citizens' needs (Bennet et al. 2020). "In exposing the elite as impression managers, populists undermine the elite's authenticity and construct their own" (Sorensen 2018, 2). Constructing an authentic self-representation can be understood as a way of telling the truth – about themselves. "The populist space of appearance" (Voelz 2018), borrowing Arendt's concept, is that in which populist leaders

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[1] Which have been further developed by Mouffe (2018), Stavrakakis (2017), Palonen (2018), Sunnercrantz (2019), Marchart (2008), Carpentier and de Cleen (2017) or Howarth (2015), among others.

construct performances of polarisation (ibid), of full identities united insomuch they share the same enemy, even if this is just a mirage (Palonen 2018, 235).

Previous literature has differentiated this "dyadic" definition from the "triadic" conceptualisation of right-wing populism, which includes ostracizing a threatening "other" (Judis 2016, Voelz 2018, Blassnig et al. 2018). The "other" is different from the elite, and usually belongs to marginalised groups, such as immigrants. One of the main differences between right- and left- wing populism is, precisely, the fact that the first tends to ostracise particular groups, while the later focuses on broader socio-economic structures (Gandesha 2018). The 'us' that populism generates can be heterogeneous (inclusionary) or homogeneous (exclusionary) (Dzur and Hendriks 2018). In left-wing populism, "the people" has an inclusive, rather than exclusive, character (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014).

Left-wing populism is here understood as "the combination of the populist impetus of expanding representation (through the appeal to "the people" against the elites)" as well as "higher participation" and the left's traditional calls for "equality and social justice" (García Agustín 2020a: 10). The normative goal of left-wing populism is not an increase of authoritarianism, as is often thought of right-wing politics, but of radical democracy (Mouffe 2018, Butler 2017). It is within this recent far-left tradition that the paper situates both Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ada Colau, and their construction of a people-centrist, anti-elitist yet inclusionary discourse that is characterised by social justice, community-involvement, mutual care, and participation (Koopman 2020).

Both in Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ada Colau's cases, the idea of locally based political initiatives is intricately linked to feminist styles of leadership. These can be observed in their focus on care, participation, and togetherness, empowering "the people" within their communities (Roth 2021, Regelmann and Bartolomé 2020, Wainwright 2020). For instance, when Colau left Twitter in April 2021, she explained that "[p]olitics has plenty of noise, testosterone" yet "needs more empathy, complexity, listening, pedagogy, and shades" (Colau 2021).

One of the contributions of this paper is to examine left-wing populism at a local level, very much in line with the new municipalism movement. The connection between both is the search for new ways of doing progressive politics, expanding democracy by empowering "the people" – although populism is seen as more top-down than radical municipalism (Roth 2021). An international referent has been Barcelona's mayor, Ada Colau, and her attempt to democratise politics by reconnecting with civil society, and people's involvement at the local level, then building "translocal solidarity" networks (García Agustín 2020b). Barcelona en Comú, the party she leads, has attempted to do politics differently by gathering political parties and citizens coming from activism and social movements. If we consider populism as hybrid, Colau's will of constructing a shared sovereignty between citizens and politicians connects new municipalist policies with left-

wing inclusionary people-centrism and anti-elitism (Portapan et al. 2020, Sintes-Olivella, Casero-Ripollés and Yeste-Piquer 2020). For instance, Colau has relentlessly attempted to fight socio-economic structures that control housing, energy, and water supplies, among others. In her own words, "municipalism is a rising force that seeks to transform fear into hope from the bottom up, and build that hope together" (Colau 2018, 194).

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has built a career around the creation of a shared identity with her constituency. The leader combines a populist identity, marked by far-left anti-elitist rhetoric, with a personal one, marked by her activist roots, as a way of legitimising herself as a true representative of "the people" (Rasulo 2020). This manifests itself in a discourse that highlights community bonding and solidarity in the face of the establishment. Her discourse revolves about "the people" deserving true political representation, and she poses as part of the people, connecting with their everyday challenges and interests. This people-centrism is opposed to traditional political elites, who are not part of the people, do not understand them and, therefore, cannot speak for them nor defend their interests. Far from representing citizens, the elites appear as exploiting "the people" for their own benefit.

This paper advances current debates by looking at the performative aspects of left-wing populism, which remain understudied (Salojärvi 2019). This project is interested in the study of two existing areas of research, "populist performance" (Palonen and Sundell 2019, Sorensen 2018) and "performed authenticity" in politics (Enli and Rosenberg 2018). Therefore, it sees political identities not as necessarily given, but as something that can be constructed in political communication. From a performative view, populism consists of articulating a given social identity through communicative strategies. Social media provide optimal "opportunity structures" for populist articulations of authenticity and togetherness (Gerbaudo 2018). Besides enabling a direct communication between politicians and citizens, social media offers a privileged space for self-presentation, allowing leaders to construct an apparently authentic and intimate relationship with their followers (Ernst et al. 2018, Engesser et al. 2017, Blassnig et al. 2020).

The concept of authenticity has recently been gaining academic attention due to recent elections that became a "battle for authenticity" (Moore 2017, Richman 2015). This is relevant because existing research has found a link between authenticity and credibility (Enli and Rosenberg 2018). This is not a truth that can be fact-checked, but a truth that comes from an unmediated communication between the leader and the public, that stems from an affective personal bonding without the type of spin and manipulation that citizens tend to associate with politics. This is even more important in a hybrid media system, characterised by the hyperabundance of information, in which personal trust becomes essential for deciding what to consume, and what to believe.

Performed authenticity is not exclusive of populism, yet previous research conducted by Enli and Rosenberg (2018) suggests that populist leaders come across as more authentic and credible and use this strategy more often, and their posts are more popular – both in terms of social media

impact and their amplification in the mainstream media. The affective turn in post-truth politics suggests that communicating in an authentic fashion is essential for building trust, as citizens' evaluation of truth partly comes from an emotional investment, and not just from objective facts (Boler 2018, Durnová 2019). Since populist leaders present themselves as the authentic representatives of the people in a context in which the traditional elite seems way too detached, it makes sense that they curate an authentic and familiar image that allows them to regain people's trust.

Bringing together previous strands of research is essential for understanding why populist leaders keep sharing posts of their bedroom or their loved ones, some of them going viral and creating a (social) media debate that has yet to be fully theorised and empirically analysed. This paper argues that populist leaders create an online self-representation as the common people in order to create affective communities of trust that can be politically mobilised. To determine whether a leader is sincere, authentic and true, citizens need to know him or her better. That is when the personalisation of politics comes into play.

The personalisation of politics is one of the effects of the mediatisation of politics and a product of the confluence of ongoing media, political and cultural changes, crisscrossed by technological developments that make it easier for leaders to show their personal characteristics to an audience, and to communicate them in a seemingly direct and uncurated fashion. In fact, social networks offer a unique space for self-representation by easily blurring the boundaries between the public and the private, the political and the personal. One of the key elements of the personalisation of politics is showing a consistency between a politician's public and private persona and shows followers that they really are who they pretend to be. This paper focuses on an understudied side of mediatisation, the intimisation of politics: 1) the politician as a person, with given tastes, emotions and personality, 2) the public scrutiny of his/her intimate relations, including loved ones and spare time, and 3) their personal space, such as home (Stanywer 2013, Weiss Yaniv and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016) and 4) their management of personal time. One of the key elements of the personalisation of politics is showing a consistency between a leader's public and private persona: a sincerity that traverses their political and personal self (Colema 2006) and shows followers that politicians really are who they pretend to be. The value of intimacy comes from the affective connection established between two people who share a space of familiarity and belonging.

While there are abundant analyses of leaders' constructions of their political persona on social networks, the way in which they construct their intimate self has received scarce attention, and we are yet to understand the discursive and aesthetic means by which this is achieved. For instance, research about politicians' creation of affective communities is quite recent and still unfolding (Döveling, Harju and Sommer, 2018, Salmela and von Scheve 2018, Eklundh 2019). This paper will contribute to this by examining social media performances of authenticity through intimate

posts, which are a useful tool for performing a given identity based on one's position towards taste, creating boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (LeBesco and Naccarato 2008).

Methodology

This paper takes a comparative case study approach by looking at two young female politicians that represent global cities, New York and Barcelona, and who present themselves as left-wing political outsiders. The importance of this purposive sampling and actor-oriented approach lies in the need to further understand other faces of populism beyond the head of government, male, right-wing leader that dominates most of academic research. This goes in line with van Zoonen's (2006) idea of celebrity politics being gendered in a way that benefits male politicians, who can easily switch between their professional and personal life without being judged, while intimacy and the domestic space have been traditionally associated to women in a derogatory manner.

This study takes home lockdown during the peak of the COVID-19 crisis as a "critical discursive moment" (Carvalho, 2008) from which the periodisation of the case study emerges. While politicians have been sharing their personal life on social media for a long time, home lockdown during the COVID-19 lockdown means that an (unavoidable) intimisation of politics has gained momentum, fully unfolding its potential (Weiss Yaniv and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016). The timeframe goes from March 11th, when the World Health Organisation declares COVID-19 a pandemic, and ends on the 21 June, the day in which the Spanish government ended the state of emergency, and the day before New York City entered Phase Two of Restart.

In this study, the coding unit is the Instagram post, whether it is a picture or a video, including the accompanying text and the transcription of the audio. In live broadcasts, only the two first minutes were coded, which gave enough time for leaders to introduce the session and start discussing with their followers. The analysis includes pictures in the politicians' timeline, as well as stories and live videos that the researcher collected daily through a desktop extension "Stories for Instagram". The sample includes 25 items for Ada Colau (12 pictures in her timeline and 13 stories) and 54 for Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (of which 4 are live videos, since she does not post personal pictures of her home in her timeline). Each post has been coded manually through content analysis on Atlas.ti according to four categories in visual rhetoric, then qualitatively analysed through a visual rhetorical analysis.

Visual rhetoric has been previously used in the analysis of populist leaders as well as political outsiders, and the way in which their construct performances of their intimate self in social networks (Salojärvi 2019, Gleason and Hansen 2016, Lalancette and Raynauld 2017). The main benefit consists of its ability to align with existing literature about the personalisation of politics, which often analyses 1) the politician as a person, 2) the disclosure of intimate relationships and tastes, 3) his or her personal space, such as home (Stanywer 2013, Weiss Yaniv and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016) and 4) the way they manage their personal time. Additionally, it allows to do so

through a combination of discursive and visual elements that construct certain aesthetics of authenticity. In this work, the first element, ethos, codes the way in which leaders present themselves as trustworthy through their professional and personal skills and attributes. The analysis of pathos examines the strategies by which leaders construct a shared emotional connection with their followers and, therefore, are presented as regular people, who are approachable and easy to identify with. The third category, topos, refers to the rhetoric of space, and the importance of home as a place of comfort, intimacy, and authentic disclosure. Finally, kairos examines the importance of temporal references in the making of a ubiquitous relationship between leaders and their followers. There is an important element of rhetoric, logos, which refers to logical arguments and has not been individually coded because it is transversal to the analysis.

Ethos: Self-Representations of the Professional and Personal Self

This paper is interested in the construction of a cohesive "us", the people and the leader, as opposed to political elites. In order to achieve this goal, trust and intimacy need to be established. In their comparative study, Bennet et al. (2020) found that the most common strategy when populist leaders construct the "the people" is to create a shared identity, similarities, and a common fate. In the context of the pandemic, it is easy to appeal to a shared and unique experience between politicians and their followers, who are undergoing excruciating circumstances.

The first part of the analysis will focus on the visual rhetorical performances of the ethos, that is, the way in which Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and Ada Colau (ACO) present themselves as trustworthy to their followers through their self-representation on their personal Instagram account. The ethos of a politician indicates who she/he is, including professional and personal characteristics, skills and experiences that can help him, or her, appear as trustworthy and authentic.

An analysis of the data reveals that both AOC and ACO play a complex code-switching between their professional and their intimate persona. The best example is Ada Colau's post on the 30 May (@adacolau), asking the audience: "Who do you see in this picture? A 46-year-old woman? A mayor? A mother with two young kids?". The data shows a constant code-switching between both politicians' professional and intimate self. Professionally speaking, inclusionary populism is articulated around the axes of people-centrism, left-wing policies for protecting the working class and other vulnerable groups (such as ethnic minorities, migrants, women or the dispossessed). For instance, Ada Colau makes special emphasis on precarious essential workers, such as those working at cleaning services.

The professional ethos of the leaders is intricately linked to their past as political activists. As a woman of colour and a Latina, the context of police brutality and mass protests plays an essential part of AOC's discourse after George Floyd's killing by a police officer on 25 May 2020. In Colau's case, she has been the visible leader of the *Platform for People Affected by Mortgages*.

Therefore, she is a strong supporter of housing rights, even more given the economic impact of the COVID-19 strict initial lockdown. This plays out in a scenario in which big interests, mostly evoked, attack progressive, young female politicians in power. Both leaders are faced with harsh criticism from far-right media outlets (Fox News, AOC) and far-right parties (Vox, ACO), and criticise traditional corrupt institutions such as the USA campaign financing system (AOC) or the Spanish monarchy, and other big corporations. For instance, Ocasio-Cortez considers that the hardest part of the job is "the relentless scrutiny. You know I have a lot of colleagues that say and do really terrible things" (@AOC 15 April 2020).

The social background and the living conditions of both politicians are consistent with a working-class ethos. This is relevant insomuch as both leaders present themselves as ordinary citizens, and their visual and discursive performances go in this line in terms of keeping it simple and amateur aesthetics. While AOC often recalls her past as bartender and vows to still be paying her student loan, ACO clearly explains where she stands: a normal woman who donates part of her salary to charity, who lives in the same rented apartment as she did before, and whose lifestyle has not been changed by politics (@adacolau, 30 May 2020).

Both the professional and personal ethos of the leaders meet around the figure of the caregiver. The carer ethos departs from a metaphor that positions both female politicians as mothers. This is not something that they reject nor see as negatively typecasting them in the domestic space (van Zoonen 2006), yet something they embrace as a quality that can help them become better politicians. While ACO takes care of her two young children, AOC constructs her ethos as a puppy carer. It is important to highlight that there is a 15-year gap between both, and this can help explain their different role as caretakers. The idea of female politicians having a mothering ethos can be understood as their ability to take care of citizens based on their experience of taking care of their loved ones: such as their kids and their pet. The values that are disclosed while interacting with them offer relevant information about their personality and their skills as politicians. Despite obvious differences, there are many parallels in the experiences that they share. For instance, they both change the tone of their voice when talking to their loved ones. One of the most intimate parallels is the self-doubt that generates taking care of a living being. This draws a parallel between their role as young mothers and their role as young politicians. This is particularly relevant in the context of a global health, social and economic crisis that had important psychological consequences for citizens.

In AOC's Instagram account, the ethos of the carer is also complemented by the ethos of being taken care of. Her dog, Deco, appears as an essential emotional support in times of social distancing and isolation that provides both affection and company. Deco is often personalised in a range of visual and discursive ways. For instance, Deco and AOC form a working team during live question and answers sessions: "Ask us anything", she writes, followed by two emojis representing a brown girl and a dog. While initially Ocasio-Cortez used the single pronoun "me", this evolves into a collective "we", appearing for the first time on April 15th. Deco's role as a carer becomes

clear on April 2nd, in a live video in which she purposely calls the dog into scene, as if she needed company before facing the conversation. Her intervention goes as follows: "So hey everyone, I just wanna say hello, maybe have Deco pop in, you know, it's a very stressful time" @AOC, 2 April.

While she starts the video in a very informal tone, addressing the audience as "hey y'all" and using such a high intensity of body movement that she almost spills the cup of coffee she is holding, by minute 2 she starts answering questions from people and she changes her attitude. In just two minutes, there is a change from a friend ethos, to a mother-like ethos and, finally, to a professional one. This is also common in Ada Colau's case, since she alternates between her professional and her mothering ethos, including her tone of voice, her facial expressions (which soften) and the colours that she uses in the stories (which turn pastel).
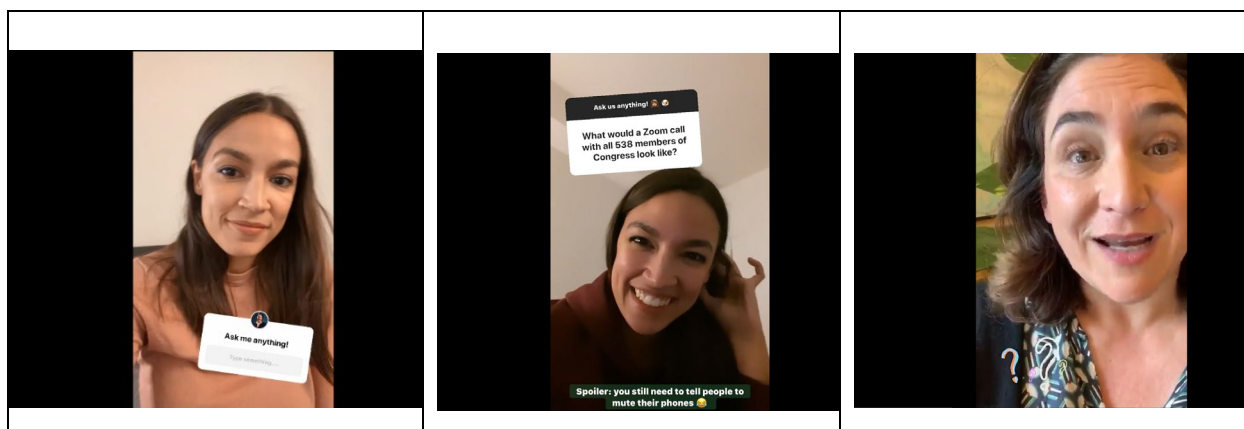

Ocasio-Cortez changes from working by herself to amusingly forming a team with her dog, Deco. @AOC, 1 April 2020, Instagram Story/ @AOC, 15 April 2020, Instagram Story/ Colau poses for the children in @adacolau, 18 April 2020, Instagram Story.

Pathos: Self-Representations of the Emotional Self

The following lines will examine the ways in which Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and Ada Colau (ACO) perform an emotional self-representation to be able to reach followers, and to establish common grounds with them. The data indicates that both leaders have used similar thematic strategies for constructing a shared affective space with citizens. The main strategy for performing an authentic, intimate relationship with followers consists of creating openness and transparency. Both leaders have created online spaces of questions and answers, conducted either live (AOC) or ongoing (ACO). Curiously, there are no instructions about the specific content of the questions, just an "ask us anything" (AOC) and "send your questions", followed by what looks like her personal mobile number (ACO). The term "anything" stresses the extreme transparency and sincerity of AOC's performed relationship with her followers. In both examples, the broad nature of the instructions results in blurring the boundaries between public and political topics of debate, and the most private and intimate space.

Home lockdown and social distancing measures require opening new channels of communication, and a second strategy consists precisely of being there for people and caring for others. Both leaders remind followers how important it is to check on each other, to catch up (AOC) and to tell people that we love them (ACO). The notion of mutual support versus individualism is often present in the stories and stresses the inclusive nature of left-wing populism. ACO's strategy of focusing the support on families in "horizontal" videos makes a direct appeal to a culture of caretaking, helping parents with children put up with the psychological stress of being locked home. "I realized that boys and girls have many questions and very good questions about such bizarre days we're living, locked at home" (@adacolau, 18 April 2020).
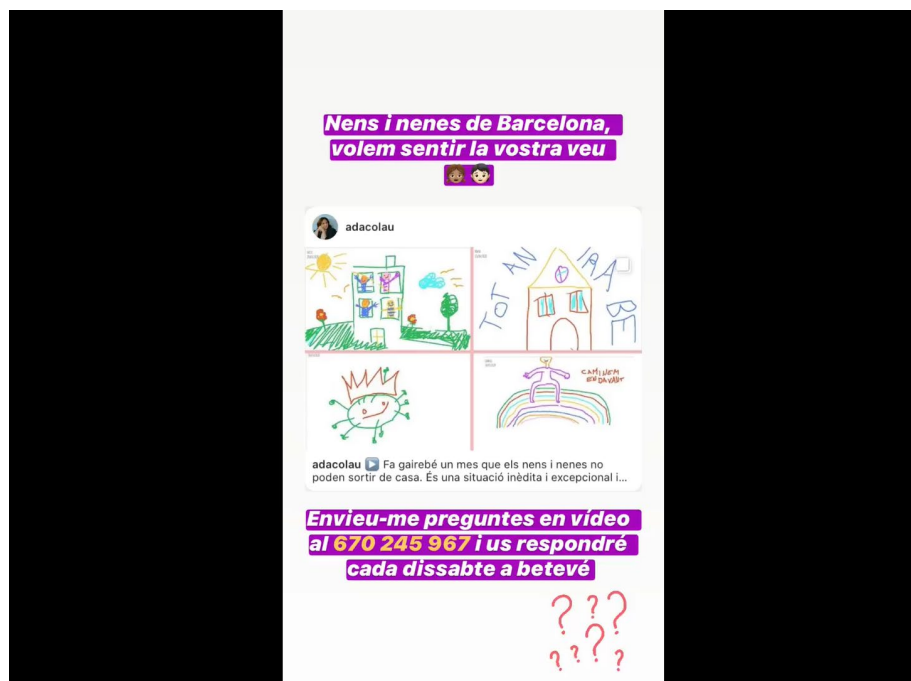

@adacolau, 8 April 2020, Instagram Story.

The carer ethos is present in a third strategy, that of preserving personal wellbeing and self-care in a moment in which increased work and collectively excruciating emotional situations can lead to exhaustion. It is not by chance that both female leaders, both collective (citizens) and personal (kids, dog) caretakers, often present themselves as being exhausted. This is both discursively and aesthetically performed through pictures lying in the couch (AOC) or directly in bed (bot AOC and ACO). Self-care is exemplified in one of the stories in which Ocasio-Cortez asks her followers to do one thing for themselves and tag her. Inclusionary populism is evoked through the simplicity of the examples she provides: "Tag me when you do #onelittlething for yourself today. A cup of tea, a moment of silence, drawing a picture, doing your hair, putting on a nice outfit".

Opening up about their life during the early days of COVID-19 follows a fourth strategy, the acknowledgement of personal hardship, whether dogs or kids' tantrums, haters' harassment or just

the emotional difficulties of their job. For instance, Ocasio-Cortez acknowledges that it is "emotionally difficult" to be the representative of the most COVID-impacted district in the USA, at that time (@AOC, 6 May 2020), and after a long morning of work acknowledges "going stir crazy" (@AOC, 29 April 2020) and needing to take a walk with her dog. Colau, on her side, shares a difficult family day in the early days of the quarantine and shares a to-do list that gathers some of the ideas that came up for managing stressful moments at home. By disclosing their personal struggles during the crisis, they also touch upon other people's suffering in a very direct manner, even volunteering to distribute food for those in need (both AOC and ACO).

Performances of caregiving, wellbeing and mutual support play an important part in the construction of pathos, of emotional bonds with those undergoing difficult moments. However, there are other performances of pathos that serve for attenuating hardship. Mutual bonding also takes place in leaders' positioning towards pleasure, and taste (fifth strategy). Both ACO and AOC show glimpses of modest living spaces and a preference for simple pleasures, such as being around family or in nature. However, the spontaneous nature of AOC's stories (rather than the more edited side of Colau's videos) means that she offers more cues about her preferences, including references to popular culture as a way of bonding with her followers around ordinary (rather than elitist) pleasures. Some examples are the disclosure or her and her partner's Friday night routine (watching the reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race*), or accompanying videos of her dog with songs that have ironical lyrics, such as Billie Eilish's Bad Guy or *Bored in the house* from Ajay Stephens. The latter song goes: "Bored in the house, I just lay on the couch, this quarantine, is not for me" as the frame gets getting bigger and bigger ending with Deco sadly looking at camera, desperate and tender (@AOC, 4 April 2020). As an animal lover, she also poses playing Animal Crossing on Switch (@AOC, 15 April 2020).
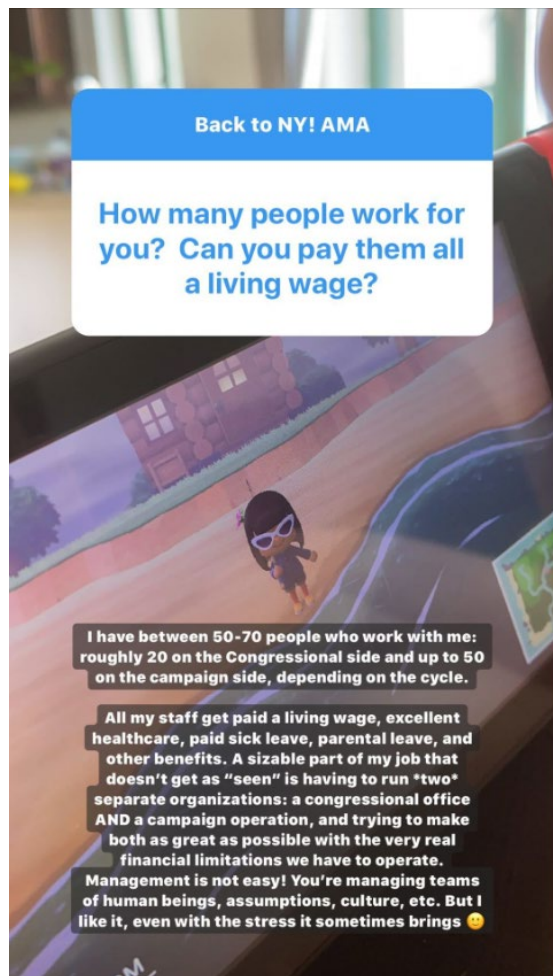
@AOC, 17 May 2020, Instagram Story.

Finally, a relevant strategy for emotionally connecting with followers consists of creating virtual spaces of knowledge-sharing. This is two-fold, both professional (information about the virus, advances, measures) and personal (as experienced by users). On the professional side, both leaders construct a populist inclusionary discourse by which they carefully explain new measures of social support that are available to their communities in terms of free meals, rent moratoriums or unemployment benefits. On the personal side, Colau focuses on knowledge sharing with kids. That is why she asks children to "help them" document this strange situation by doing a collective diary of pictures, drawings, videos, and other creations. Since AOC spends significantly more time online with her followers, there is a range of everyday knowledge that is shared. For instance, she teaches followers how to make Margaritas (in reference to her working-class past as bartender, but also performing as a political outsider), or how to use a "trash bag" as a filter for better videos. The uses of informal language and simple, affordable tricks go in line with the inclusionary discourse of the left-wing politician, who poses as an ordinary person.
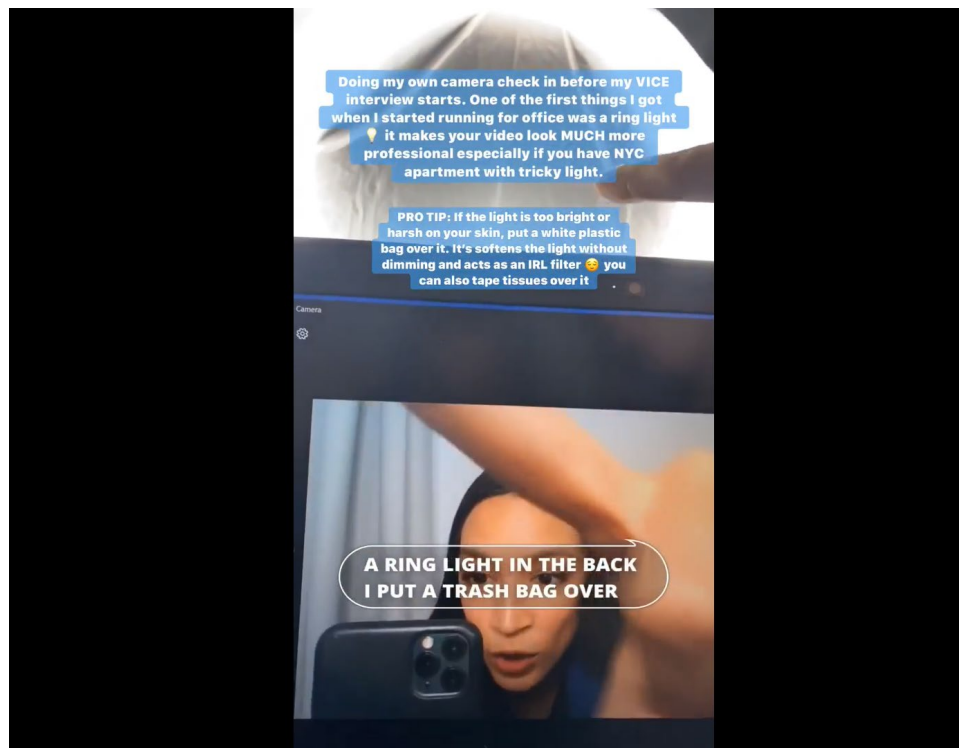
@AOC, 29 April 2020, Instagram Story.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez often performs a fast code switching between her different ethos. In the live video in which she teaches followers how to make a Margarita cocktail, she starts explaining the process of putting ice in a blender: "Anyways, I figured we're gonna make a frozen Marg'. I'll give you the recipe real quick" (@AOC, 4 April 2020). Around the second minute, she suddenly stops, reads a message from a follower who just got fired, and continues making the cocktail while talking about unemployment, getting fully immersed in her political self and forgetting about sharing the recipe altogether. This is one of the many examples in which switching from one ethos to another implies important emotional U-turns: from sharing personal joy, to sharing collective distress.

@AOC, 4 April 2020, live video.

Throughout the analysis, there is a sense that the initial efforts of both AOC and ACO for transmitting positivity to followers in times of crisis fades as weeks go by. This is in line with their impressions about the emotional hardships of being a politician, even more as women. The two faces of politics can be seen in the two posts below, one the first day after the Spanish announcement of a state of emergency, the second in late May:


@adacolau, 12 March 2020 picture in her Instagram timeline/ @adacolau, 30 May 2020, picture in her Instagram timeline.

Topos and Kairos: The Rhetoric of Place and Time

In this paper, topos refers to the place from which Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ada Colau are talking. This is important because it indicates the degree to which they share their intimate space, both physical and psychological, and how much access they give followers to. Therefore, topos is understood not as a commonplace in argumentation, but as the rhetoric of place, as the

acknowledgement that the place from which we speak has ideological implications; in the way we send a message and the way it is decoded.

Ada Colau always poses in her house with a neutral background and presents herself on Instagram as "a normal person" who has not been changed by politics (@adacolau, 23 May 2020). In AOC's case, normalcy appears through glimpses of what is shown yet backgrounded. Information is much richer in AOC's videos, especially when the camera zooms in and out, or follows the moves of her dog, disclosing unplanned elements of her daily life. Some of these objects can tell us a great deal about AOC's positioning towards taste, and her self-representation as an ordinary person. For instance, she makes a healthy (but not too healthy) lunch consisting of an improvised smoothie with fruits, vegetables, and canned orange juice. Looking into detail, we can see that the spinach she uses is organic (@AOC, 29 April 2020). However, the background of other videos also reveals that she has a sweet tooth and keeps butter cookies, Oreo cookies and even an empty McDonalds box around the house. Adding to spontaneity, her house often appears clean yet relatively messy, with wrinkled sheets, cushions out of place, unfolded blankets and forgotten empty mugs here and there.
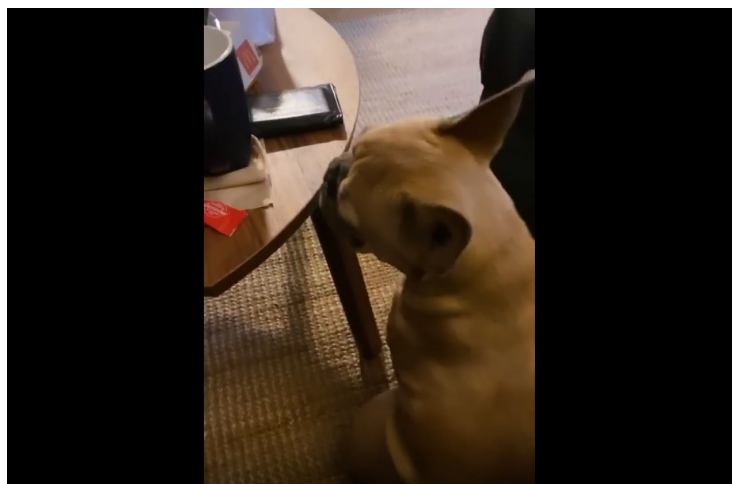
@AOC, 4 April 2020, Instagram Story.

The most intimate place that both AOC and ACO show is their own bed. The disclosure of the bedroom and, more specifically, lying in bed, can be associated with the ultimate place of rest and comfort, but also of vulnerability. In AOC's account, she shares a video of herself, sitting in bed inside the covers with Deco on her lap. While both leaders post images lying in bed, Colau's picture, barefoot and wearing informal clothing, resting in bed, received harsh criticism in the Spanish mainstream and social media. This obliged her to make another post addressing the sexist jokes she was victim of, such as references to posing for a dating site or behaving as a teenager.
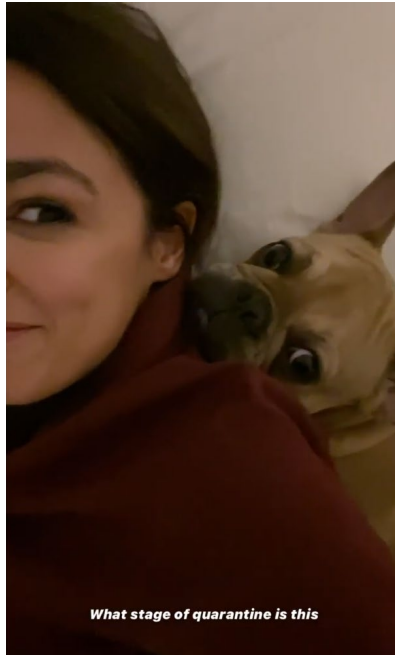
@AOC, 14 April, Instagram Story/ @adacolau, 3 May, Mother's Day, picture in her Instagram timeline/ @adacolau, 22 May 2020, picture in her Instagram timeline.

Finally, kairos appears as a particularly relevant rhetorical device that reveals both politicians' response to changing and unprecedented circumstances. The data reveals that the extent to which AOC and ACO post on their Instagram profile outside working hours is remarkable. We can trace that by looking at the date and time in which stories where published, but also thanks to temporal references in the posts. For instance, AOC tells followers that she is joining them live because she is not making dinner that night, thus freeing personal time for talking with them (@AOC, 21 April

2020). Spare time, night-time and weekends are particularly active moments in which rest and relax are shared with constituents. This contributes to a two-fold image: that of professional politicians but also of ubiquitous friends, ready to offer company and support at any time.

Conclusion

Populist leaders' performances of authentic intimate moments with their followers are important for the field of media and political communication because they help us understand the dangers of downgrading politics to popularity contests, but also the advantages of engaging those who feel disenfranchised by traditional politics (Khrosravinik 2018, Salmela and von Scheve 2018). Therefore, this paper has shown that left-wing populism can be potentially inclusionary, claiming marginalised groups' right to political participation and informing new ways of fostering inclusiveness, strengthening trust, and enhancing citizen's interest in politics through social media (Mouffe 2018, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

The data reveals that politicians' posts of intimate moments at home revolve around the notions of intimate and emotional connections with their publics (an element of people-centrism), and anti-elitism. By presenting themselves as hardworking politicians that are part of the normal, ordinary people, both Ocasio-Cortez and Colau construct their intimate selves as approachable and unpretentious. The performances of authenticity during COVID-19 lockdown enable them to emotionally connect with their followers from home through the notions of comfort, safety, and familiarity, which are played against the uncertainty of the unknown. Being home is seen as a unique opportunity for having a glimpse of politicians' most intimate space and the way in which they construct their professional and personal ethos in order to appear more authentic, how they connect emotionally to their followers (pathos), and, finally, how the rhetoric of place (topos) and time (kairos) are disclosed in the personal material that they share with followers.

The main findings conclude that Ocasio-Cortez and Colau perform a complex code-switching between their political and personal self, always aligned with progressive and inclusionary ideas. Examples of these are the idea of not leaving anybody behind, but also their performances of taste, with references to simple habits and popular (rather than elitist) culture. This is achieved through an emphasis on social injustice, but also through a mother-like ethos that emphasises collective caretaking in the face of individualism during the crisis. This goes in line with their efforts to emotionally connect with their followers in times of social distancing through online question and answer sections, the creation of spaces for sharing personal experiences and emotions. This is something that can only achieved through a (performed) sincere approach to their own personal lives: their joyful moments of rest, their spare time, but also an acknowledgement of their own vulnerabilities in excruciating personal and professional moments. Finally, the data reveals that sharing their personal space and time with their followers enables the leaders to perform a sense of virtual ubiquity that makes them more accessible to citizens and, especially, of those who might need their care.

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Mediating Close Friendship Intimacy in Times of (Social) Distance

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ABSTRACT

This article explores mediated intimacy in distant close friendships as a necessary but challenging course of action to bridge physical absence. Linking media and communication studies with migration research, which often studies the mediation of intimacy of transnational family members and their communicative habits, this study examines how mediated communication differs between distant close friends and translocal families. In this respect, communication media are helpful to keep up existing friendships from a distance. However, due to their mediated nature, they offer an illusory feeling of intimacy that cannot compete with face-to-face interaction. This article explores communicative friendship exchange in times of social distance by drawing on German case studies in pre-pandemic times. It examines how mediated intimacy is reproduced in distant close friendships by offering emotional or mental support and bridging physical distance via communication media to outline potentials in times of pandemic-related social distancing restrictions. The study presented in this article contributes to the discussion of mediated intimacy, and highlights potential opportunities to enhance physically distanced friendships in post-pandemic times.

KEYWORDS

Mediated intimacy, Friendship, Social distance, Everyday life, Distant close friends

Introduction

In times of social distancing, communication technologies become even more crucial in geographically distant friendships to bridge the physical distance. In contrast to translocal families, which usually have at least one mutual place of living, friendships are supposed to be well equipped for digitally mediated maintenance due to their independent constitution of place and time (Nötzold-Linden 1994, 146). Moreover, friendships can quickly adapt to personal life changes (Nötzold-Linden 1994, 219) and could be kept through communication technologies. Despite their differences in social structures and categories, translocal families and distant friends often use digital media to interact with each other from afar. Migration research, at the centre of analysis of distant relationships, however, has primarily focused on how translocal family members connect and maintain their bonds with communication media across geographical distances (Diminescu 2008, Leurs 2015, Madianou and Miller 2012). Less is known about how distant friends negotiate their relationships.

With regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, the question arises of how close friends communicate via media in times of social distancing. Distant loose friendships often continue to exist even if there is less or no communication taking place at all (Teichert 2020). On the other hand, distant close friends can interpret the absence of digital communication or its deliberate refusal as a personal rejection and, in the long run, even dissolve a relationship. In this article, I contrast translocal families' digital communication as an example of extensive use of synchronous media with that of distant close friends who prefer short, asynchronous, and sporadic ways of communication. Outlining the benefits and affordances of translocal family communication allows me to suggest hidden potentials of digital communication for distant close friendships, especially in times of social distancing. Grounded in a social constructionist mediatization approach (Hepp 2020, Krotz 2001), this paper looks at communication media's value to produce mediated intimacy in distant close friendships.

(Deep) mediatization of distant relationships

The process of mediatization refers to an open, ongoing discourse of theorizing the social and cultural transformation concerning media and communication (Hepp 2020, 9). Mediatization does not take place selectively (Hepp 2020, 10) but as a "meta-process" of societal change (Krotz 2007a, 256). This is reflected in changing communicative habits and social and cultural conditions of human coexistence (Krotz 2001, 33). People use new technologies to communicate and turn them into "media" by creating the need and demand for societal change, as Friedrich Krotz (2007b, 31, 47–48) states. Thereby, the process of mediatization (Hepp and Krotz 2012, 9) emerges. As a meta-process, mediatization occurs in the background and is reciprocally produced by mediated human actions and practices and influenced by them (Hepp and Krotz 2012, 9, Krotz 2007b, 31). Thus, mediatization is both part of, and expressed through, everyday culture (Couldry and Hepp 2017, 35).

Mediatization as a process, according to Couldry and Hepp (2017, 34, 41), can be retraced to the past five to six centuries. After the era of mechanisation and electrification, the period of digitalisation began around 1950 with digital communication and continues today in terms of virtual social networks and mobile technological devices (Couldry and Hepp 2017, 48-51). Currently, the scientific discourse discusses another phase, the so-called "datafication" that Couldry and Hepp (2017, 34) characterise by an increased accumulation of personal data. The phases of digitalisation and datafication can be located in the concept "deep mediatization" (Couldry and Hepp 2017, 34). In this paper, I apply the understanding of mediatization as a "meta-process" of social change (Krotz 2007a, 256) and the construct of "deep mediatization" (Hepp 2020) as a temporal definition of this process. In this respect, I explore communication media's role as a facilitator of social and individual mobility and, consequently, as a prerequisite to producing mediated intimacy in distant close friendships.

Intimacy negotiations in translocal families

To examine how close friends maintain intimacy over physical distance, I compare translocal families' interactions, a key theme in migration research, with distant friendship communication to explore similarities and differences. Translocal families have a long tradition of establishing proximity and intimacy by communication media, in the past by letter writing (Greschke 2014, 156) and today increasingly by mutual online interaction (Miller et al. 2016, 105). Family migration research in this vein has focused mainly on the mediated negotiation of intimacy by referring to communication media's technical adaptation (Chambers 2013, 112) but the actual production and negotiation of mediated intimacy between family members remain unexplained (Greschke 2014, 158–159). In this regard, translocal and transnational families report positive effects, for example, by using visual media components to communicate with family members left behind. Video chats help see children and grandchildren growing up (Francisco 2015, 181) and parenting from afar (Francisco 2015, 188). In translocal parent-child relations, *frequent contact* seems to be an essential factor in keeping up the family communication. Furthermore, *communication about their everyday life* seems to matter to negotiate family relations continuously.

When migrant parents become foreign workers, they often report a feeling of duty and necessity to care *financially* and *emotionally* from afar. Also, adult children who moved abroad perceive these responsibilities and duties, helping their families financially and checking on their parents' health condition and well-being by calling home often (Horst 2006, 149). Particularly synchronous mediated communication with migrated family members "can generate feelings of proximity despite geographical distance", as Jay Marlowe et al. (2017, 93) conclude in their study. The everyday use of digital media technologies facilitates keeping up intimate relations with family members abroad. Close relationships can be maintained via digital co-presence across distances. However, the perceived mediated intimacy might also provoke the desire for face-to-face interaction. Accordingly, as Hall (2020, 104) states, people feel less lonely after face-to-face interactions than after exchanging text and voice messages or video chats with their close ties. Hales and Caton (2017, 103) emphasise this effect in their autoethnographic study on aeroplane travelling for business and family reasons. As Hales and Caton argue, taking a plane to meet face to face with one's family members can be morally justified, although environmentally questionable, if the family lives far away from one's workplace. Hence, face-to-face communication provides a more intimate and close connection than communication media can enable.

Although families and friendships are both based on close intimate connections, friendships differ from families regarding their actual and perceived duties and obligations (Allan 1979, Nötzold-Linden 1994, 11, Rawlins 2009, 9). Family relations are maintained by law (Blatterer 2016, 66, Rawlins 2009, 9), even if members live in different countries. On the other hand, friends are not obliged to take care of persons left behind and can even dissolve friendships in their absence. However, close friends can voluntarily support each other *emotionally* (Allan 1989, 83, Blatterer 2016, 63, Hansen 2009, 237) and *financially* (Allan 1989, 51–52, Rawlins

2009, 13, Wiseman 1986, 204–205). Hence, there is need to particularly address how distant close friends negotiate mediated intimacy through media communication.

Mediating intimacy in distant close friendships

In contrast to families, friendships depend on a continuous reassurance of their reciprocally perpetuated relation via media because of the missing legal bond and the non-existent attachment to a physical place to constantly reproduce conditions for digital intimacy. Consequently, mediated proximity cannot be taken for granted as a pre-existing unit of measurement, it must always be negotiated (Sheller and Urry 2006, 8). Across physical distances, it becomes more challenging to negotiate and maintain intimacy and trust (Harrison 1998, 98–100, Miller et al. 2016, 105), particularly during pandemic-related social restrictions, if these actions have mainly taken place face to face before. Communication media allow specific actions but render others improbable or impossible (Deppermann et al. 2016, 5). Hence, it becomes more complicated for friends to negotiate the terms and conditions of their friendship, such as being available face to face or via media in times of need.

Throughout this article, I refer to *distant close friends* as previously locally established close ties between two or more persons who perceive each other as mentally or emotionally particularly relevant. These meaningful close connections do not necessarily dissolve by spatial distances (Allan 1989, 19). In fact, as Mollenhorst et al. (2014, 73) found out, only one to three per cent of social relationships are severed by physical distance. Instead, a change of character or worldviews can be considered as a relevant reason for a friendship break-up, specifically after periods of physical absence (Wiseman 1986, 200–201). Based on "strong ties", as Mark S. Granovetter (1973) labelled these connections, distant close friends share the desire to care for and support each other even from afar. By shifting physical co-presence to mediated co-presence (Sheller and Urry 2006, 3–4), distant close friends can use a range of (digital) media technologies to substitute the lack of face-to-face interactions (Gomes et al. 2014, 2), provided communication media are perceived reciprocally as a means of maintaining a relationship.

However, the current shift towards asynchronous forms of digitally mediated communication, such as short texts and voice messages significantly decreases communicative interactions in friendships. Short messages often convey trivial content and the negotiation of new face-to-face appointments (Church and Oliveira 2013, 355, Mannell 2020, 282). Although constantly checking for new messages on smartphones has now been established as a social practice of connectedness (Bayer et al. 2016, 128), an existing mediated connection to distant close friends does not seem to be synonymous with an actual negotiation of friendship. Compared to families, who communicate frequently and synchronously via media due to their perceived and actual duties and responsibilities to care for each other, distant close friends communicate less in digital environments because of the missing connection to each other's everyday life. Friends choose to interact irregularly via asynchronous short messages instead of reconstructing their intimate relations in everyday mediated co-presence. Nevertheless, distant close friends can

still influence each other's thinking and behaviour, as Magret Hansen (2009, 196) points out, even if there is no communicative interaction taking place.

In terms of mediated intimacy, the dichotomy between the desire for face-to-face interaction and the reciprocal negotiation via asynchronous media communication is reinforced in distant close friendships. *Mediated intimacy* is defined by Feona Attwood et al. (2017) as requiring a (digital) medium to form an intimate relationship between humans. The continuous (re)production of intimacy, in turn, is understood according to David Morgan (2013, 35) across three dimensions: first, as a physical expression, for instance, to touch someone's arm; second, as emotional trust in terms of non-verbal understanding, and third, as private biographical information that builds up over time. The intimacy dimensions mirror the quality of a relationship and differ in terms of their embodiment in every relationship (Morgan 2013, 35). Hence, if the continuous reproduction of intimacy across distances increasingly takes place via communication media, it becomes evident that communication media indeed can help to build emotional trust between individuals and to expand intimate knowledge about one another. However, media cannot replace the haptic feelings of a face-to-face interaction yet. Therefore, the process of mediatization (Krotz 2001) supports not only social mobility but also influences the conditions for the reproduction of mediated intimacy in distant friendships. New digital technologies and apps for short and asynchronous communication enable distant close friends to rely on their previously established intimate connections. However, they hinder friends' considerations to renew and renegotiate their fragile relationships in synchronous mediated interactions, as, in comparison, family members regularly do. Subsequently, I explore how mediated intimacy is reproduced in distant close friendships by providing emotional or mental support and bridging physical distance via communication media to outline potentials in times of pandemic-related social distancing restrictions.

Methodological approach and data analysis

Drawing on empirical findings of a recent dissertation study on mediated friendship negotiations in Germany, 25 in-depth life history interviews (Fuchs-Heinritz 2009, Küsters 2009) conducted in 2017 and 2018 provide insight into memories and recent friendship experiences of 14 male and 11 female job entrants, aged between 22 and 37. The study followed the Grounded Theory approach and methodological framework of Strauss and Corbin (1996), respectively Corbin and Strauss (2015), and the guiding principles of theoretical sampling and memo writing along with the research process. Following Corbin and Strauss (2015), constant theoretical sampling took place in the three stages of open, axial and selective coding during participant recruitment and subsequent interview transcription, data analysis and interpretation. The dissertation study aimed to present a diverse sample in terms of professional backgrounds and work experience, media usage and number of friends to ensure the richness and variety of the selected data, as Strauss and Corbin (1996, 155–156) suggest. Interviews took place at the participants' preference, either at their homes or workplaces, at universities or outdoors, to ensure a calm and quiet atmosphere. The interview length was between 90 minutes to 140

minutes. Major topics included the participant's personal definition of friendship and past and current friends to explore individual meanings that shaped the basis for their friendships. In terms of media use and mediated negotiation of friendships, questions covered communication apps and time intervals for reciprocal media communication and face-to-face meetings. The interview data was transcribed and coded via QDA software. During the interviews, participants were asked to draw, write or sketch a self-centred map of their friends' network (cf. Hollstein and Pfeffer 2010, Straus 2006). For seven days after the interview, participants were also asked to fill in media diaries (cf. Berg and Düvel 2012) to visualise and complement their previous narration. All data was pseudonymised, and all interview sections were translated from German to English, while linguistic expressions of the interviewees were kept where possible.

In this article, the mediation of intimacy in distant close friendships is presented by case studies of three female participants. These case studies were specifically chosen to demonstrate the strength of their distant close ties in comparison to their otherwise loose local social networks. The core categories developed from the Grounded Theory data analysis regarding mediated intimacies encompass *distant intimacy*, *mediated everyday intimacy* and *tacit intimacy*. These types of intimacy mediation in friendships differ in terms of their communicative negotiation. *Distant intimacy*, for example, stands out due to the significant emotional value of an intimate connection to a distant close friend that prevents the formation of new local social bonds. *Mediated everyday intimacy* characterises the communicative exchange of everyday inanities via media between distant close friends to maintain a previously locally established level of intimacy. Lastly, *tacit intimacy* describes how distant close friends still rely on each other, even though their communicative interaction is minimal. All categories presented in this paper are exemplified by the three participants' narrative construction of their distant close friendships.

Findings

Mediating intimacy across distances

As explained above, the mutual negotiation of friendships differs along with the availability and use of media repertoires and becomes more difficult the less distant close friends are integrated into each other's local everyday life. While Hall argues, mobile media allows you to "take your family and friends with you wherever you go" (2020, 189), this study's empirical findings suggest that intimacy negotiations in distant close friendships are not based on obligations to talk frequently and to discuss important life decisions, in contrast to family relations, as presented earlier in the literature review. Instead, distant close friends live on their previously established intimacy experiences. First of all, their communicative exchange takes place less frequently. Second, these interactions are often based on trivial topics aiming to reassure and maintain an established intimate relationship. Discussing everyday life issues, as translocal families do for the continuous reproduction of intimacy, is often omitted in distant close friendships. Although silence and less frequent digitally mediated interaction can be seen

as expressions of intimacy, they can also reveal feelings of exclusion and loneliness due to missing physical and synchronous media interactions. The female participants selected for the purposes of this article, Sandra, Isabelle and Vanessa, reflect particularly well the dimensions of the three types of intimacy mediation, *distant intimacy*, *mediated everyday intimacy*, and *tacit intimacy*.

Alone among strangers: Distant intimacy

When close friendships are maintained across time zones and world regions, space- and time-related experiences change (Sheller and Urry 2006, 7). Distant close friends might experience "distant intimacy" (Lambert 2013, 77–78, Raphael and Epstein 2013), reinforcing the dichotomy between the desire for face-to-face interactions with close ties in spatial separation and the inclusion in a local circle of friends. Dance educationist Sandra, 27, characterises the friendship with her three distant close friends, Clea, Mai, and Tea, who live in Belgium, as a "deep connection with soulmates". Her three close friends have a tremendous emotional significance for Sandra because, in her opinion, these are friends with whom she "really connects deeply", which she does not often find within her local environment. As she reports, "then I'd rather have [...] no connection, than one where I actually think, that doesn't really interest me at all". Sandra has difficulties dealing with a current health issue that prevents her from attending dance events and visiting her international friends more often.

> Sandra: "Well, they have crystallised out for me, because I realised […] I talk to them about the fact that it's hard for me, that I can't participate anymore because of my health. [...] And actually, eighty per cent of my social network is somehow almost no longer accessible and […] that is definitely totally difficult for me. [...] Because I also feel lonely and somehow try to establish connections in my shared apartment. But now I also noticed, despite they are all super nice [...] that's not enough for me (laughter). [...] That's just not enough. [...] I spend relatively little time with friends somehow. So, I do have […] work and, and therefore/ in any case, this summer I withdrew from almost everyone [...] Because there is no fixed circle [of friends] where […] we meet regularly or something like that."

In her local environment, she mainly focuses on work and "spends relatively little time with friends" because she does not find the same level of deep emotional connections in her local social network that she created with her three friends abroad. Sandra feels lonely and isolated. Meanwhile, she tries "to see any one of the three [distant close friends] around once a month". She bridges the time until the next reunion with telephone calls, text and voice messages. Nevertheless, media communication is no substitute for Sandra's lack of face-to-face contact with her three soulmates. Thus, it is easier to cope with the feeling of loneliness when friends mutually know that they will meet face to face again in the foreseeable future (O'Hara et al. 2014, 11). Only by combining digitally mediated interaction with regular visits to her distant close friends in Belgium, does Sandra experience ongoing negotiations on all three dimensions of intimacy, as stated by Morgan (2013, 35), that enable her to focus more closely on these relationships. The lack of close local friendships, in turn, leads to an increase of *distant*

intimacy for Sandra. She reaches out for emotional support to her distant close friends via communication media as often as possible, while in her local offline world, she feels alone among strangers.

Dissolved local networks: Mediated everyday intimacy

HR manager Isabelle, 31, provides an example for mediated everyday intimacy by exchanging everyday occurrences on instant messenger to re-establish her close friendship bond perpetually with one of her distant close friends. Isabelle's previously close local friendships repeatedly dissolved and changed to translocal friendships in the past. Now, many of her distant close ties live in other regions of Germany or even abroad. Hence, Isabelle must resort to communication media to compensate for her distant friendships' lack of physical intimacy. However, she is not very enthusiastic about implementing media communication to bridge the missing haptic exchanges. As she says, she "hates" voice messages, and she "does not want to type that much either". Isabelle explains, "it's just not that I would pick up the phone/ I probably wouldn't do that anyway [...] pick up the phone and say something like, "I need some support right now", so that's kind of not my thing". Instead, Isabelle travels several times a year to visit her close friends. As she only experiences "a slice of life" of her distant close friends' everyday life, she labels this type of relationship a "weekend friendship". Nevertheless, she says, she misses "this continuity, that you always know what's going on and that you are always very, very close". Only with her distant close friend Hilke, who currently lives in Luxembourg, Isabelle experiences an enjoyable "*WhatsApp* exchange over distance, once a month or so", by text and voice messages and voiceover IP calls.

> Isabelle: "[Hilke is] someone with whom you can also easily exchange such trivial stuff [...] So there is a connection that is not terse [...] but that is really nice when she explains to me, "Here, I bought a drilling machine." And I'm like, "Whoa, awesome. Fantastic. It looks really nice.""

With Hilke, Isabelle manages to assure emotional trust and intimate knowledge, two of Morgan's (2013, 35) intimacy dimensions, by exchanging trivial messages. The virtual witnessing of Hilke's everyday life, exemplified by their communication about the purchase of a drilling machine, demonstrates their particular communicative level of friendship intimacy that is constantly renewed and reproduced. Although the two friends cannot meet face to face to try the new drilling machine, Isabelle probably knows about Hilke's necessity to buy a new one due to their continuous exchange of everyday inanities. Despite the distance between Germany and Luxembourg, Isabelle and Hilke enable each other's virtual participation in their friend's everyday life via communication media and thus, continue to create and maintain emotional trust and intimate knowledge. In addition to that, the friends also maintain Morgan's (2013, 35) third dimension of physical expression by reciprocal physical resonance (Rosa 2016, Wetzel 2014) through mutual visits, approximately six to seven times a year. Consequently, Isabelle's multiple weekend trips to her distant close friend Hilke help her to compensate for the lack of physical friendship intimacy in her everyday life. However, it also becomes evident

that Isabelle and Hilke's connection is an exceptional one, which Isabelle does not share with many other local or distant friends.

"You know they are there": Tacit intimacy

Maintaining intimacy with distant close friends on a day-to-day basis is a time- and energy-consuming task. Commercial clerk Vanessa, 23, highlights this discrepancy. In Vanessa's view, a friendship nowadays "doesn't have to happen in person anymore". Sometimes, she even gives preference to asynchronous media interaction with her distant friends over face-to-face meetings. Although Vanessa established a loose local network of friends at her current place of residence, her distant close friend Sabrina, who moved a few hundred kilometres away, seems to be more important to Vanessa than her local friends. Vanessa and Sabrina are in contact virtually about every three months – whenever Vanessa reaches out for Sabrina's support as a *tacit distant friend*.

> Vanessa: "It can happen that I grab my mobile phone at eight or nine in the evening and say, "Man, I am in a REALLY shitty place right now", and when she's on her mobile or somehow online or notices my message or even a day later, she replies immediately, "Man, don't look at it so negatively. You have this and that positive". You always know each other a little bit. So, she says, "Man, you've done so much", and so. Well. Everything goes on, you exchange ideas and you also just help each other, just by writing. Just by writing, just so/ just exchanging, just also having an outlet like that. So, like I said, it's basically when you're feeling like crap. You can either sit at home and cry alone into your pillow, for example or somehow break the TV or whatever. [...] Somehow let out the aggression, anger or joy or whatever. But if you can share that, if you can really share that with someone. Just write it down like that, that's already […] friendship for me, like that. And as I said, you just, you don't have to see each other for that, you don't have to meet each other for that. It can follow in writing, as I said. And that is […] an invisible bond, which connects you […]. I don't know when I will meet them next time, how long the contact will last or so, but you know they are there."

This "invisible bond" between the two friends, which Vanessa outlines in this excerpt, consists mainly of exchanging asynchronous text messages. Despite the lack of face-to-face contact between the two, Vanessa manages to connect with her distant close friend, as long as Sabrina reciprocally reacts to Vanessa's requests. Even if this does not happen until the following day, Vanessa relies on her friend to provide her with the emotional strength she seeks by reaching out. In this case, Vanessa's omnipresent inclusion of instant messenger in her everyday life becomes evident. Instead of calling her friend Sabrina or contacting one of her loose local friends, she rather sends a text message to her distant close friend and waits for a delayed response. Tacit intimacy develops implicitly between the two. Vanessa does not share everyday inanities with Sabrina, as Isabelle does, nor does she withdraw entirely from her local social network, as Sandra does. In Vanessa's perception, face-to-face contact to establish and reproduce intimacy is not necessary in distant close friendships anymore. It is more convenient for Vanessa to reach out to her distant close friend when she requires an instant intimacy

affirmation. In the meantime, she remains more or less detached from Sabrina's everyday life. In this case, Vanessa's and Sabrina's friendship intimacy is based on emotional trust and intimate knowledge about each other, according to Morgan's (2013, 35) understanding. However, their intimacy negotiations mainly refer to past experiences, as Vanessa expresses. Instead of inclusion of new mediated or physical intimacy by communicatively exchanging about each other's everyday life, as translocal families do, their previously established emotional trust diminishes to a brief mediated reassurance of a friendship that is primarily based on the past.

Discussion: A balancing act between silence and demand

In times of "deep mediatization" (Hepp 2020), digital communication media facilitate the mediated connection of translocal families and distant close friends. Contrary to translocal family communication, it becomes apparent that significantly less digitally mediated interaction takes place within distant close friendships. Distant friends ask less for mental, emotional or financial support than translocal family members. In migrated families, help is actively provided *and* demanded. As shown above, distant close friendships are not based on obligations to communicate and care for each other. Instead, they depend on previously established mental or emotional connections that are secured and kept alive by short and sporadic media communication. Sandra and Isabelle experience a constant desire for face-to-face interaction with their distant close friends to renew their previously established intimacy and trust. Vanessa, in contrast, explains the potential of distant mediated availability with her close friend Sabrina that works well, as long as Sabrina reacts timely to Vanessa's request. Thus, we can observe a decrease in the conversational nature of distant close friendships. The differentiation between sociality within loose local friendships and mediated intimacy with distant close friends becomes apparent when looking at the participants' approaches to face-to-face versus digitally mediated communication. Although the study's participants might have urgent support needs to talk and exchange with closely connected friends, it does often not occur to them to ask their distant close friends for instant synchronous communication. Instead, they would rather send a short text message and wait for their distant close friend's reply. As Isabelle stated, she does not "pick up the phone" to request her friend's emotional support. The demand for mental or emotional intimate conversations with distant close friends via media seems to be a difficult task. Although living in physical distance, close friends continue to communicate on intimate topics in person rather than via media.

Consequently, media communication with distant close friends is often used as a reminder of an existing relationship. However, an extensive emotional or mental exchange is mainly reserved for face-to-face encounters. The feeling of proximity between distant close friends depends heavily on the actual denegation to use existing media technologies to renegotiate intimacy virtually. This phenomenon can be experienced and reinforced in times of social distancing, associated with a deceptive feeling of mediated proximity, when individuals necessarily communicate less face to face and more via media. For instance, during the

COVID-19 pandemic, the third dimension of intimacy production, according to Morgan (2013, 35) the physical expression, is even more at risk in distant friendships, as travelling and social restrictions dominate everyone's life in conditions of lockdown. Hence, the mediation of intimacy in friendships could either shift even more to a digitally mediated level or decrease further. In this respect, it is imaginable that distant close friendships align themselves more closely with migrant families' daily and synchronous communication habits to extend the feeling of digitally mediated intimacy when face-to-face interactions are challenging to realise. Synchronous media communication, for instance, calling or video chatting, has proven to be a successful measure for migrant families (Francisco 2015, Miller et al. 2016). Thus, it can be beneficial to re-establishing intimacy in friendships in times of social distancing.

As illustrated by the case of migrant families, integrating each other into one's everyday life can create awareness when distant close friends are needed the most. A missing local social network and pandemic-related restrictions on face-to-face interactions can be mentally and emotionally challenging. If friends continue to exclude everyday conversations from their current sporadic virtual asynchronous communication, the situation Isabelle and Vanessa describe is most likely to happen in other distant close friendships as well: in a specific moment of need, distant close friends either do not reach out to call their close friends or they send a short text message and wait for their friend to get back to them at their convenience without *actually conversing with each other* about the underlying reason for the contact initiated. A quick and brief reaction to a friend's need for communication helps in the specific situation to produce *tacit intimacy*. Nevertheless, distant close friends who do not have a supportive local social network can use the entire communication media repertoire to engage in everyday conversations with their distant close ties, instead of texting at one's convenience, to overcome the potential feeling of isolation and loneliness. The further friends become emotionally distant from each other, and the more fragmented their communication actions, the more difficult it is probably to maintain a mutual willingness to communicate and to reciprocally share with each other, especially if the delay of responding increases by asynchronous communication in times of deep mediatization.

Finally, the study's limitations should be pointed out. First, it is important to consider that not every distant friend is supposed to catch up with their entire social network near and far at all times. The case studies presented disclose the importance of distant close friends if the local social network is based on loose connections. Second, the cultural embedding in Germany might influence participants' perception and the underlying cultural understanding of friendships and friendship communication, which cannot be transferred to other cultures without considering the specific value and connotation of friendship. Third, as the data gathering took place in pre-pandemic times, further research can explore the consequences of social distancing during, and after, the COVID-19 pandemic to compare retrospectively if and how a potential shift to a largely digitally mediated communication, necessitated by life in lockdown, occurs in distant close friendships.

Conclusion

This article presents the mediation of intimacy in distant close friendships and discusses physical distancing's potential consequences. Grounded in the literature on migrated family members' remote communication repertoires, their communicative negotiation of intimacy, perceived obligations and care for each other despite geographical distances, this article explored how distant close friends in comparison exchange news and requests for emotional and mental support via communication media. Although previously local close friendships often transform into translocal connections, missing in-depth conversations and intimacy negotiations further the feeling of isolation during social distance that might be overcome by more explicit synchronous media use in distant close friendships.

Concerning the reproduction of mediated intimacy in distant close friendships, three distinct dimensions arise from the empirical data that have relevance to mediated friendships in the COVID-19 pandemic: *distant intimacy*, *mediated everyday intimacy* and *tacit intimacy*. The dimension of *distant intimacy* reflects a longing for face-to-face interaction to receive emotional support from distant close friends that cannot be compensated by media communication or by a loose local network of acquaintances, as exemplified by the case of dance educationist Sandra. *Mediated everyday intimacy* is expressed by Isabelle's case through a continuous exchange of short and trivial messages that are complemented by regular face-to-face encounters to remind and continuously renew a previously established level of friendship intimacy, despite the social distance while physical encounters are reserved for meaningful conversations. Lastly, Vanessa's case demonstrates how the lack of mediated and face-to-face communication manifests in *tacit intimacy*, reflected by spontaneous reactivation requests for emotional support. Although all mediated intimacy dimensions discussed above mirror Morgan's (2013, 35) interpretation of the two dimensions of emotional trust and private information, the missing third dimension, physical intimacy, cannot be replaced entirely via media in times of social distance. Both Sandra and Isabelle expressed their desire for face-to-face contact with their distant close friends, although these encounters are limited to a few per year.

In conclusion, three primary outcomes of this study should be summarised in light of intimacy mediation during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is characterised by limited possibilities for face-to-face interaction. First, the gravity of the pandemic highlights the importance of taking responsibility for, and nurturing, close friendships if they wish to preserve them. Although there is no legally binding and official duty to take care of each other, close friends often are concerned, and they often *want* to provide mental or emotional support to their closely connected distant friends. Second, if individuals are not aware of a friend's emotional or mental issues near or far, they cannot help them in times of need. Third, using digital media for synchronous interaction in times of physical distancing and actively asking for, and providing, help to a distant close friend might enhance the experience of mediated intimacy in friendships, as exemplified with translocal family communication. Relevant topics and emotional issues in friendships are often not exchanged via communication media but rather in face-to-face interactions. However, in times of social distance, they cannot take place often. Mediated

communication cannot substitute intimate face-to-face encounters with close friends entirely, but it can help to decrease the feeling of loneliness in an increasingly mediatised world, and mainly in times of social distancing.

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Biography

Jeannine Teichert is a Research Associate at Paderborn University, Germany. Her research interests involve interpersonal and intergroup communication, media sociology and migration research with a special focus on friendship interaction.

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The Paradox of Presence:

Autoethnographic study of life and death via social media

ANASTASIYA MAKSYMCHUK, *Lusófona University*

ABSTRACT

The following work is an autoethnographic study on emotional engagement and sense of presence mediated by Internet in cases of extreme situations. This story is the one of death. In April, my stepfather had died of lung cancer. The Covid-19 lockdown has caught him and my mother in Berlin, where my stepfather has been undergoing his treatment which unfortunately turned out to be unsuccessful. Based in Lisbon, I was not able to be physically next to my parents during these hard times. However, I tried to do my best giving support via messages and videocalls. It coincided that on the night of my stepfather`s death, when my mother was next to him in the hospital room, I was also there, "next" to them both, but via videocall.

KEYWORDS

Autoethnography, Mediated presence, Distant suffering, Death witnessing, Internet

I.
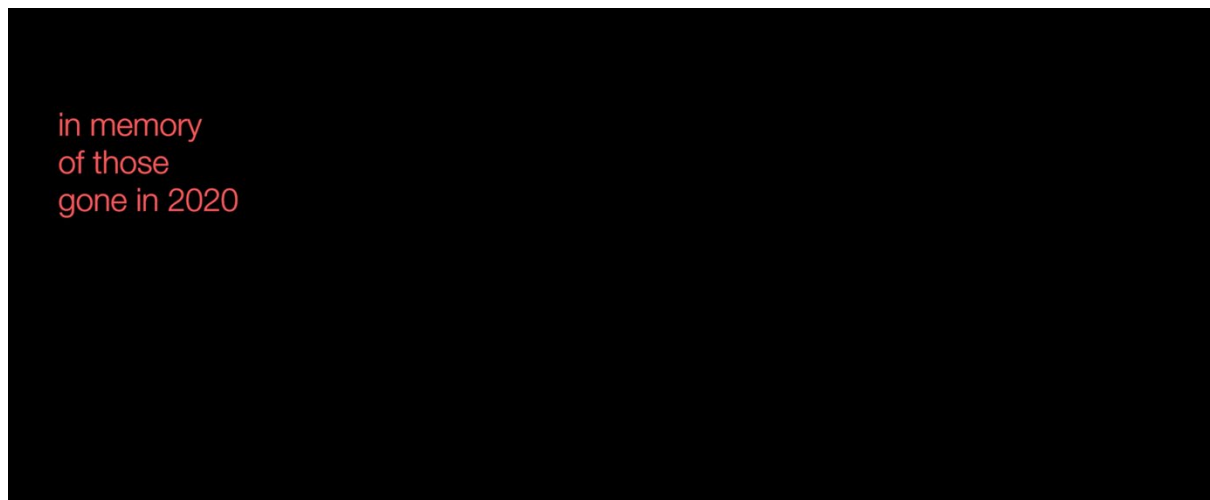
PRESENCE

Video by Anastasiya Maksymchuk

Writing, directing & editing by Anastasiya Maksymchuk

Music: "La Tabki" by Toni Geitani
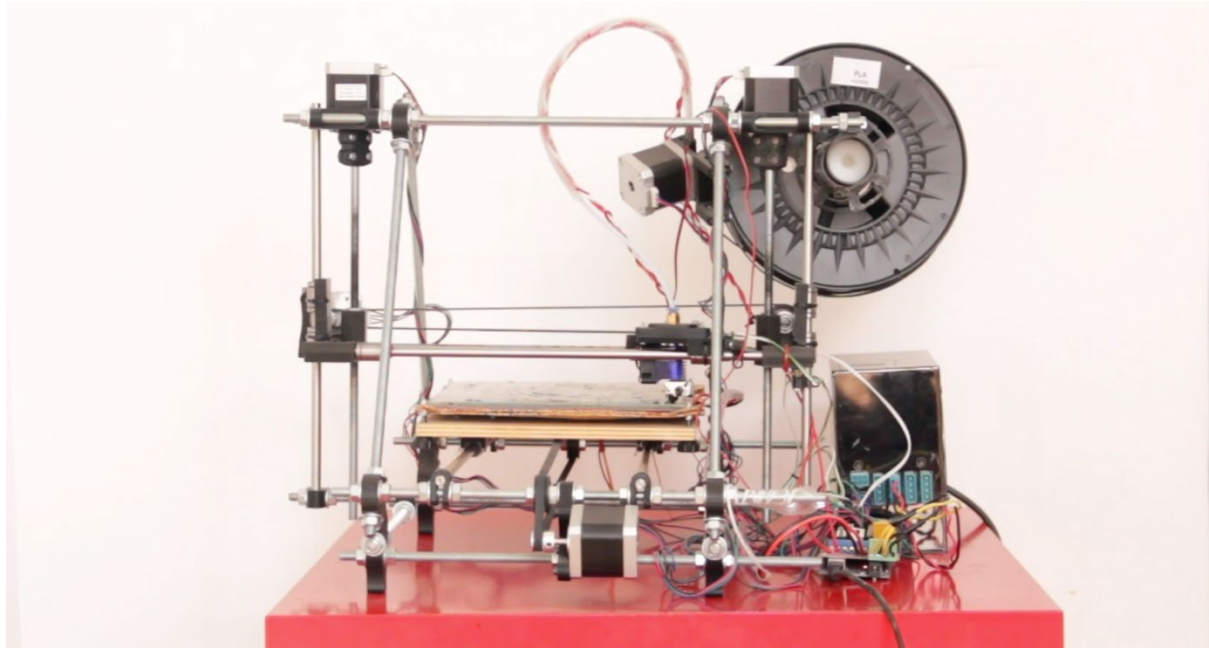
3-D printing machine & design by Antonio Alves de Campos

October 2020

Click image to watch:

URL: **https://vimeo.com/530961164/9e9bdc715c**

II.

Interview with Anastasiya Maksymchuk

Interviewer: Sasha Brovchenko

11.06.2020 via Zoom (Lisbon-Kyiv)

Translation from Russian

[The Internet connection was a bit unstable, some delays occurred.]

S. *Ok. So, actually, I was going to start from another point but since we have these delays... Did you have any delays during those calls with the hospital? And how would it affect the communication?*

A. Wow. I haven`t even thought about it. Delays... I think there were. I think there was a delay while I was talking to him for the last time.

[In fact, as I read it now, I`m not sure if there was one, but apparently, I subconsciously wanted to start from that point.]

That was the day when my mother told me: "I guess these are the last days we have with him". Because that`s what she was told by the doctors. She said "God, the situation is completely disastrous", she was in the hallway. And in that hallway, because it was not in front of him, she would have her emotional crashes. She would cry, call me all in tears...

S. *Would it be via videocalls?*

A. Yes. My mom prefers videocalls. It is even sometimes a bit inconvenient because there might be a weak connection, however the video is always there. And after an hour and a half she calls again... and suddenly her voice is super carefree and even happy! As if suddenly everything was ok!

S. ***Because she was in his room?***

A. Yes, because she was next to him. And we would all smile like idiots, as if everything was ok, I told him he looked good. And he made a joke: "Yeah, and I`m not even wearing my make-up". And that`s how it was. But he actually was hardly able to stand up already. I think the content of that talk wasn`t that important. The fact we had it was.

S. ***I wonder how did this happened so that you were present via videocall during the moment... Was it a coincidence?***

A. Yes, yes, sure, it was a coincidence. During the last days... Actually, during the last two weeks even... I talked to my mother every day, which was not the case since long time ago. I was trying... to find a way to support. At first my strategy was to just listen. It seemed useless to give hope when it was already clear there is none. And it felt like lies. Sometimes I would lie. And the very night before he died, we had a talk about how they two have actually met. It lasted for at least an hour, I had a glass of whisky, she was drinking her Amaretto. As she was telling their story, I have caught myself on the thought that maybe I shouldn`t have made her recall those things, maybe that would add to her pain afterwards. But I didn`t want to interrupt her because I saw it has made her switch off the present moment, she was happy again for that hour, and it was important. The moment she finished her story, misery has instantly come back to her face.

But let me start talking about the exact night. She called me that night, and said that the medics have brought some bedsheets for a small couch in his hospital room. The doctors suspected it might happen during the night, and my mother was going crazy trying to decide if she should stay in the hospital room. I didn`t realize in the beginning what those bedsheets really meant.

In the room, there was a monitor with the indications of oxygen and pulse of his. On that day the general indications lowered comparing to the previous ones. He was asleep. And so we are talking about those bedsheets, and suddenly my mom notices that the oxygen level drops. She starts panicking: "It goes down! Nastya, what should I do? It goes down!" I tell her to call the medical staff, and she goes away to call them. Her iPad is facing the wall, and somewhere behind the screen there is his bed. So, I wasn`t seeing him, but I saw my mother as she came back, she was going in and out of the shot. I could hear two nurses in the room with my mom. Some sounds of rushing and dialogues in German between the medics I was not able to understand. Mom was walking back and forth, restless, panicking. So, I told her to go to him and hold his hand. She did, and I could only see the wall again. I heard her talking to him and asking him to keep breathing.

At some point the nurse appeared in the frame and told me in English: "I cannot feel the pulse". He said it as if he was expecting me to tell him what to do next. I asked if that meant we have lost him, and then he said yes. I had a feeling that for some reason he didn`t want to utter it first. As if he needed some kind of a permission from me to acknowledge it. At once the second nurse came up to the screen and asked me to translate to my mom that he had died calmly and painlessly in his sleep, that he hadn`t been suffering and it was a soft transition. My mom came up to me and I told her we have lost him. "Yes, mom, this has happened. We will go through this together".

[I had to act as a distant mediator, or even a guide in a way, and it is strange and even embarrassing to notice some similarities of this position with the one of computer gaming. I could notice that my guidance was needed and accepted. I was constantly saying something to my mom during those several minutes while she was holding his hand, and my most repeated phrase was "I am with you".]

After we all acknowledged what had happened, the organizational and bureaucratic part began.

S. *When did this start?*

A. It started right away. And that was a weird moment, because suddenly they began to refer to my stepfather not by his name but as "the body". It happened too fast. The human has left from there, and now it was the body. I really didn`t want my mother to switch to all that organizational hurry and lose the moment of saying goodbye. So, we asked the nurses to leave us for five minutes and talked to him a bit. We did that small ritual. I told her about the theory that a dead person could hear everything for a half an hour after they die.

[This theory is taken from the narratives of religion, not science, but that didn`t matter at that moment. We needed that ritual.]

I consider that my last talk to him. "Let`s tell him we are thankful to him. I am in particular". She said she regretted I had not said that while he was alive. Well, but I simply couldn`t.

[It felt like a familiar experience to send words into emptiness. In fact, this is what we do when we send voice messages or speak on camera. You don`t have the recipient in front of you but you believe he`s going to hear you somehow.]

I tried to make our experience a little bit more conscious. To have a closure, if not spiritual then at least emotional. I kept being on the phone with my mother up until she came back home and went to sleep. Some kind of rationality was guiding me. Maybe that was thanks to the distance, distance is always safe. It protects you from too strong impressions, too heavy emotions, too scary images, it filters and compresses them. Watching a live stream is still different from being on war.

Biography

Anastasiya is a PhD candidate in Media Art at the Lusófona University, Lisbon, and an internationally acclaimed TV and Film Director. Her field of research is hybrid films and artistic reenactment as a cinematic method. Her documentary *Dogs Don`t Bite Good People* (2020) and her MA graduation film *Charcoal* (2020) will be premiered in 2021.

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'The Paradox of Presence': Creative Response

KATHERINA RADEVA, *Two Destination Language*

"I am here."
"I am next to you."

What do you feel when you hear this?

Do you trust me, the voice of the writer that I mean, really mean - I am here and that I am next to you? My voice is close to your ear, just on the right of your left ear.

I am here.
I am next to you.

Or do you feel like I am faking it? Like I am not *really* here, close to your ear? Do I really mean that I am *here*, and I am next to you?

Presence and reality, or is it lie and fiction? Of course, what political regimes around the globe have thought is, that like in a good drama, xfiction can be a reality.

The paradox of presence is a poignant exploration of intimacy and distance. It creates a kind of map of presence. A map of a very personal experience of embodied grief from afar. A kind of map across space, across time, and across experience. A map across environment and circumstances.

As an immigrant myself, or if I may put it differently, as a fellow traveller, I often find myself caught in these questions. Questions of presence. There is often a strong feeling of guilt about not being "there". My physical body is far away even if my mind is really *there*. Imagining what it is like to be there and often having a technology-mediated version of seeing what I am "missing". So, am I really missing it?

Having "missed" family deaths and many births and many parties, I have often asked myself: How can my empathy be present from such a vast physical distance?

This work, this exploration, is a reminder that trust is at the heart of every communication. That trust forms so much of how we relate and translate the world for ourselves and those around us.

And presence is key to that trust. And, by presence, I really mean a *shared experience*. And any shared experience may happen in person, it may be mediated by technology or by an analogue form. A shared experience is based on a communication exchange, like a conversation.

So, therefore the main notion of "being there" explored in the work, as a support system and mechanism, absolutely forms the connection sought across space, time, circumstance and physical presence. Because being there and listening and responding is an active and informed choice to participate. And so, to partake or to participate and to listen deeply, is to be present.

If anything, this pandemic has taught us is that connection, when truthful, whether mediated or in physical proximity, is companionship.

"The paradox of presence" is a moving reminder of how the human experience is captured and shared, how experiences are translated, and how care can be administered even through Messenger, with love.

Biography

Katherina Radeva is a multi-award-winning theatre maker, visual artist, set and costume designer, and creative director at Two Destination Language. She tours internationally and her visual artwork has been exhibited across Europe and the United States. She is a vocal campaigner for inclusion and diversity and fair pay for arts and cultural workers. Born in Bulgaria, Katherina has lived in the UK for over 20 years as a first-generation migrant.

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"You're not being serious enough!": Renegotiating Relationships during Lockdown

LAUREN DEMPSEY, *University of Nottingham*

ABSTRACT

The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 led to a UK lockdown, where citizens were asked to stay at home for an undefined period. This forced people to make sudden decisions regarding where to live and who they would not see. Through 18 semi-structured interviews with individuals aged 27-72, this paper explores how people maintained friend-based, romantic, familial and professional relationships during lockdown in Spring 2020. The enforced separation following lockdown motivated people to reconsider how they conducted relationships in and outside the home. Within the household, people verbally and physically renegotiated boundaries to ensure relationship harmony. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) was utilised to maintain connections with estranged relationships, as people accessed new platforms to replicate familiar face-to-face (F2F) processes online. This article considers the disruption to relationships experienced during this time, providing an in-the-moment insight into the use of CMC in maintaining relationships during the first UK lockdown.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, UK lockdown, relationships, computer-mediated communication, face-to-face communication

Introduction

The rapid spread of COVID-19 in 2020 led to a pandemic, where people worldwide were required to alter their movements to avoid spreading the virus. The UK went into lockdown in March 2020, with citizens urged to stay at home (Ofcom 2020a; Fuchs 2020; CIPD 2021). This disrupted pre-established social practises: rather than being able to visit family homes, meet with friends, or see work colleagues at the office, people had to rely on computer-mediated communication (CMC) to perform social activities. Whether this was through phoning, instant messaging (IM), video-calling or social media (SM), there was a sudden, unprecedented dependence on mediated communication.

CMC was widely used in everyday life before 2020, already a normalised means of communication (Rainie & Wellman 2012; Chambers 2013, 2017; Miller 2016; Parks 2017). However, the abrupt lockdown meant people were not prepared to conduct the majority of their interactions from home (Fuchs 2020; Ofcom 2020a, 2020b). This motivated a sudden need to learn how to maintain numerous relationships in unfamiliar settings, both on and offline. Suddenly friendships, romantic relationships, professional bonds and familial dynamics were disrupted as individuals had to navigate novel relationship challenges during an already uncertain era. As academics have noted the importance of partaking in both strong and weak tie-relationships (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Chambers, 2013), this paper will consider how UK residents conducted an array of relationships during the lockdown period of Spring 2020. Through 18 qualitative interviews with UK residents, it examines how people negotiated both face-to-face (F2F) and mediated relationships during this time, the role CMC played in their everyday communications, and how this era altered relationship dynamics.

Research of this nature is important for understanding how people responded to relationship challenges in this time of uncertainty. By exploring experiences across both F2F and mediated relationships, this paper uncovers a dramatic shift in how people managed their everyday interactions, using CMC in new manners and renegotiating their pre-existing relationship norms. This shift in behaviour has long-lasting implications, both in terms of challenging existing academic debates regarding the role of CMC in everyday interactions, and altering how people navigate their relationships online and offline. As lockdowns continue into 2021 and the future remains uncertain, this paper captures experiences during the early days of COVID-19-related disruption and provides a foundation for future research on the impact of numerous lockdowns on relationship maintenance.

Computer-mediated communication and relationships

A leading narrative across academic literature within media studies presents online relationships as distinct from offline relationships (as noted by Parks 2017). For instance, Turkle (2011, 11) discusses "how we are changing as technology offers us substitutes for connecting with each other face-to-face". The use of language such as "substitutes" (Turkle 2011, 11), "displaces" (Boellstorff 2008, 29) and "surrogate" (Rosen, 2007, 31) propels the narrative that one form of relationship replaces the other.

However, alternative research has indicated that many CMC users are utilising it to *maintain* existing ties, rather than to *replace* them (boyd 2007, 2014; Mendelson & Papacharissi 2010; Rainie & Wellman 2012; Miller 2016). These scholars contend that online and offline relationships do not exist entirely independently but are related and developed across both online and offline spheres, where "ICTs supplement – rather than replace – human contact" (Rainie & Wellman 2012, 144; see also Baym 2010). Parks (2017, 506) refers to these as "mixed media relationships", defining them as "social relationships that parties conduct in whole or in part through the use of multiple media, including F2F". In an increasingly

mediatized society (Couldry 2012; Lundby 2014) – where media flows through everyday tasks and interactions – it is increasingly difficult (and inappropriate) to disentangle online and offline connections.

Disrupting the disrupter

Although computer-mediated communication has increasingly been used to maintain relationships over the last two decades, the lockdown period of 2020 drastically changed how users were expected to engage with this form of communication. The boundary between online and offline communication was suddenly more distinct than it had been in years, and the social norms, etiquette and motivations for use that people had been steadily developing over time between online and offline interactions (Gershon 2010; Miller 2016) were abruptly thrown into flux.

The connection between relationships and CMC use over time has been widely considered in the academic literature by scholars examining the extent to which the use of CMC has changed relationship norms and social etiquette, to changing network management, to explorations into how the affordances of developing platforms may shape everyday exchanges (see for example Rainie & Wellman 2012; Chambers 2013, 2017; Miller 2016; Parks 2017). The unparalleled disruption to relationships during the 2020 lockdowns means it is essential that this connection is re-examined now, as events continue to unfold, and people are repeatedly forced to reconsider how they navigate relationships with every governmental restriction change. To my knowledge, there has not been an empirical qualitative study that captures the experiences of UK residents physically distanced from others during Spring 2020 and the impact this era has had on their relationships and use of CMC. Thus, this article considers the research question: How did people maintain relationships both face-to-face and via computer-mediated communication during the first lockdown of Spring 2020?

Methodology

I conducted 18 qualitative interviews between 14th April and 23rd May 2020. At this time people in the UK were still in lockdown 1.0, asked to stay at home apart from when undertaking limited exercise or essential activities.

Interviews were conducted remotely using video-calling platforms *Zoom* and *Skype* (bar three interviews, conducted over the phone to overcome device/ internet restrictions). This allowed me to build rapport with participants, observe non-verbal cues, and gain an insight into their living circumstances, as I was "shown" their living space (for example, some pointed out to me where they were working, others showed me that they were conducting their interview from their bedroom, etc.). The interviews were semi-structured where, although there was always a focus on CMC use and relationships, discussion was flexible and altered from

person to person. The shortest interview lasted 37.05 minutes; the longest was 51.35 minutes. I audio recorded each interview and securely stored recordings in a password-protected folder to which only I have access. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participant privacy.

Sample

I utilised a snowball sampling methodology to recruit participants. Although there are limitations of this methodology (discussed below), snowball samples are deemed effective for recruiting hard to reach audiences in a cost-effective manner (Crouse & Lowe 2018). They depend on participants helping recruit further participants, making this sampling technique appropriate for the personal and potentially sensitive subject as participants were first approached by friends or family (Crouse & Lowe 2018). I initially only contacted people I personally knew with an overview of my proposed project, asking them to contact people they felt might be interested in learning more. They then provided me with the contact details of people who wanted to partake in the study. By asking friends and family to contact people on my behalf I minimised my personal role in the recruitment process and was able to reach numerous different social networks, widening the potential of reaching multiple groups.

I emailed 23 people overall, receiving responses from 18. Each interview was confirmed after participants replied with a signed consent form and a suggested interview time. Once I had completed the 18th interview, I decided to cease recruitment, as I felt this was a sufficient amount for the purposes of the study, having confidently reached thematic saturation.

Despite the benefits of the snowball sampling methodology, this approach meant that my sample was not demographically representative (Crouse & Lowe 2018). Six participants were male and 12 were female; only two participants were non-white; and I did not collect socio-economic status information. These sample limitations made it difficult to explore any connection between such variables and responses to lockdown, providing an opportunity for future research to explore any potential connections in more detail. Despite these limitations, the participants did come from a variety of backgrounds, professions and life stages. Their ages ranged from 27-72, they lived in rural and urban locations across England, and were part of a range of relationships. Five participants were born overseas, thus had relatives and friends from across the globe who they were in communication with. As such, I was able to consider a wide range of personal experiences during the first COVID-19 lockdown in England.

Analytical approach

I used the University of Nottingham's Automated Transcription Service to transcribe the audio recordings, saving time and costs. I reviewed the transcripts and uploaded them into

analysis software platform NVivo11. The use of such software when managing qualitative datasets is encouraged by scholars, as it aids efficiency and organisation (Nowell et al. 2017). I used NVivo to collate my transcripts and conduct a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is considered by researchers to be a simple yet underrated form of qualitative analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Nowell et al. 2017). It is seen as especially beneficial when managing qualitative data from numerous interviews, as it allows for overarching themes and sub-themes to be identified and coded (Boyatzis 1998; Braun & Clarke 2006; Nowell et al. 2017). I systematically read through each transcript, coding themes as they emerged. I then examined all themes from the 18 interviews together, identifying key overarching themes and sub-themes. The themes found during the analysis inform the findings and insights discussed in this article, which are presented in the following sections.

Renegotiating F2F relationship dynamics: Changing households

Following the first announcement of an impending lockdown in March 2020, participants reported that they made rapid decisions on who to live with. The younger participants especially – who were already "in-between" households as they regularly shifted between rented accommodation, parents' and partners' homes – reported that the sudden UK lockdown forced them to reconsider where they lived. For example, Amelia – who previously split her time between her boyfriends' and parents' homes – decided to stay full time with her parents. Veronica, on the cusp of moving into shared accommodation, suspended her move to again stay with her parents. Conversely, Elizabeth decided to move into her boyfriend's house, away from her usual "home":

> I'm currently living with my boyfriend […] about 45 minutes from where my "home" is, where I was living with my parents […] I've kind of migrated up here 'cos I had a conversation with my parents […and we decided] that it would be better for me to actually move away from my family home.
>
> **Elizabeth, 27, Yorkshire**

Through discussion with her parents it was mutually decided that it would be safer for Elizabeth to live with her boyfriend, thus forsaking the ability to regularly see her parents. These rapid decisions often determined how individuals would live for the duration of lockdown, shaping their relationships both in and out of the home.

Negotiating household dynamics

During lockdown depth of time with fewer relationships replaced breadth of interaction with multiple people, disrupting pre-established dynamics and relationship norms and motivating a need to articulate new boundaries and norms within the home. Even those who remained

within their typical households reported disruption to relationship dynamics. As participants' daily lives outside the home were restricted, their routines *within* the household also altered. 14 participants were either asked to work from home or were furloughed. Four participants also had children who were conducting schoolwork from the house. This led to nearly all participants physically changing the layout of their homes, creating designated workspaces and boundaries across time and space. For instance, Aaron and his wife had to adjust to working from home around their two teenage sons:

> I've got a work laptop which is set up in [my youngest son's] room. My wife's got a work laptop so she set up in the main master bedroom. We're lucky, you know, we've got enough space that everyone can go into.
>
> **Aaron, 45, Surrey**

Aaron acknowledged the advantage of having the physical space at home to manage these new demands, but still felt challenged by this upheaval as he and his family established new physical boundaries and divisions within the household.

This division of physical boundaries also motivated participants to articulate verbal agreements over personal space. Participants considered space to be vital for maintaining their sense of self whilst living in unfamiliar circumstances, even with those they were emotionally close to. The type of relationship shaped how these conversations took place, as exemplified by Elizabeth and her boyfriend versus Amelia and her parents:

> [My boyfriend and I] get along really great. I'm one of those people that I need my own space in order to feel like me […] So to navigate that with him we had some really kind of frank discussions about being able to create spaces for each other to have that alone time.
>
> **Elizabeth, 27, Yorkshire**

> I kind of commandeered this room as like *my* space for like studying, because also we need to kind of have our boundaries in the house […] Space is really important, just because we're in the house together, I need my alone time still.
>
> **Amelia, 29, Yorkshire**

While Elizabeth approached this topic through a sensitive negotiation with her boyfriend, Amelia was more explicit in defining her own physical space away from her parents. This implies that the sense of intimacy and emotional sensitivity associated with different relationships shaped how participants communicated their need for space.

Participants were aware that emotions were high during lockdown and reported taking steps to avoid conflict. This was again most evident in the parent-child connections within the sample, where both the parents who were living with their children (five participants) and the

adult children living with their parents (two participants) discussed the need to act sensitively around each other:

> We've all compromised, and I think we've reached a decent respect for each other's needs of space, or cleanliness, tidiness. All those things that make for friction.
>
> **Samantha, 71, Yorkshire**

> I'm just trying to take as much time as possible away from [my parents]. If I can like sit in my room or go for a walk or a run. I think just take that time, take a breather.
>
> **Veronica, 30, Nottinghamshire**

From parent to teacher

The parents with school-aged children in the house also noted a disruption to their day-to-day routines that challenged their role as a parent. Lockdown led to parents extending their roles and undertaking new, unfamiliar tasks with their children. They noted a shift in their dynamic with their children as they switched between teacher and parent, rule-enforcer and care-giver throughout the day. This was exacerbated by the unfamiliar stresses surrounding lockdown, where it was difficult to gauge if they were managing the situation 'correctly' and successfully balancing their work and family lives.

Bea and her husband struggled to balance their workloads around caring for their two-year-old daughter, who was usually at day-care. Carol and her partner created a rigorous routine within their home to ensure that their children – aged 10 and 13 – were not missing out on their education. They assumed the role of teachers by creating and adhering to structured work schedules for their children:

> I'm working one morning, my husband is working the afternoon and then we switch the next day where he'll work in the morning and I work the afternoon. So one of us is always up in the 'school room' […] and I'm in one of our mezzanines which is our office. […] We're quite highly organised so for instance, we set up a massive timetable for everyone to work from.
>
> **Carol, 41, Buckinghamshire**

Carol and her husband ran their own business, providing flexibility in how they taught their children. This flexibility was not possible for all participants, as Aaron – working from home for a larger business – reported that his teenage sons (aged 13 and 16) found the adaptation from school to home-life challenging. He tried to ensure they were productive with their days, again balancing this around his own workload, however, unlike Carol, he could not ensure they were constantly intellectually stimulated:

They're not that hard to look after, but you worry about them spending too much time in front of screens and stuff like that, because if you're working it's difficult to stimulate them in a proper way.

Aaron, 45, Surrey

Aaron's concerns as a parent regarding screen time, potentially shaped by the prevalent narrative that too much screen time can be harmful to children (as critiqued by Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2016), conflicted with his role as a 'teacher', where he felt obligated to ensure that they completed their schoolwork.

Relationship surveillance and subterfuge

During the research period there were government rules in place regarding appropriate behaviour during the lockdown. These rules could cause relationship turmoil, especially when individuals within the same household held differing views on how the lockdown rules should be interpreted and followed. Participants' desire to ensure the safety of loved ones versus their want to continue F2F relationships with others outside their household could lead to disagreements over the 'right' course of action and elevated tensions as they tried to decipher and act on new social rules, both in and outside the household.

For instance, Aaron (45, Surrey) noted a disagreement he had with his wife following a visit to see friends, saying: "I walked around to my friend's house to talk to him across the street, but I was told off for doing that, so I haven't done it since". Aaron's wife's concern derived from her discomfort with potentially breaking the rules, a point that caused Aaron to reconsider this decision and shaped his future actions.

Furthermore, parents of adult children noted that the two generations responded differently to the new social rules. These parents reported feeling scrutinised by their children, who adopted authoritative roles. Kieran especially was bewildered by this new surveillance:

The three children are quite anxious that we remain as locked down, as isolated, as home-bound as possible. […] I don't think without the worry and anxiety from the children [my wife and I] would be as disciplined as we are being at the moment. […] I mean they are also probing, you know: are we behaving ourselves? The phrase that struck in the beginning is […] "You're not being serious about this enough".

Kieran, 72, Yorkshire

This reversal of who had authority in their relationship could lead to tension as parents felt frustrated by their children telling them what to do. The adult children in the sample also found the surveillance of their parents during this time stressful. Amelia, for instance,

worried for her parents' safety and reported tension within her family due to differing views on how they should navigate lockdown:

> There's a big kind of weight on my shoulders. […] My brothers are very kind of controlling and very protective of my mum and dad and they come immediately down on me, kind of like "you've got to be really careful when you go out because you know if you catch anything, mum and dad are really high risk you'll be endangering them" and stuff like that.
>
> **Amelia, 29, Yorkshire**

The possibility of introducing a virus into the household exacerbated the stress brought on by lockdown and created further tension between parents and children, as children worried about the wellbeing of their older parents.

Despite the high stakes, some parents reported that this monitoring led to subterfuge, as they plotted to perform activities or see friends without their children knowing:

> People are beginning to rebel and I think maybe that's what's happened to me, that I'm thinking: "do I need to be quite so cautious? Do I need to stay behind closed doors?" I mean, I'm driving to my allotment [to see people].
>
> **Samantha, 71, Yorkshire**

> The kids maintain a degree of policing […]: sometimes it's got to the situation where [my wife] and I will say to each other, "don't tell the children [what we're doing today], they'll get upset about it".
>
> **Kieran, 72, Yorkshire**

Gordon also found it difficult to strictly adhere to the rules if it meant his elderly mother was on her own, stretching the rules to prevent her from feeling isolated:

> I've got my elderly mum. I know I shouldn't see her, but if *I* don't see her I don't know who else would. So I'm very careful. I do make sure my hands are really washed and she stays her distance. The real concern is just looking after your family, isn't it?
>
> **Gordon, 58, Devon**

Through cognitive dissonance Gordon reasoned that although he knew he should not be visiting anyone, his mother would be isolated without him, providing a reasonable justification to visit her.

Expanding networks

Despite the growing frictions in some households, numerous participants reported positive changes in their relationships during lockdown. Many felt closer to those they lived with as they gained a rare opportunity to spend time together, especially if, like Ken, they were furloughed from work:

> [My partner and I] can really take this time to relax and appreciate each other's company. In normal day-to-day life it would be that we've got work, we've got to do this, we've got to do that, you know. Whereas now we don't have any of that. […] We can actually just take time to have conversations together, bake together, we've been doing yoga […] it's just given us that time to really sit back and chill out.

> **Ken, 30, Lancashire**

This unexpected opportunity to have extended quality time with his partner gave Ken the opportunity to feel closer to him. Furthermore, four participants found themselves expanding their personal networks by developing new relationships with their neighbours:

> We've got quite friendly with our neighbours and I think had we not been locked down, that wouldn't have happened […] when the weather's been really good, we've been out there for like drinks or a barbecue.
> **Rebecca, 30, Plymouth**

The Clap for Carers social movement, where people across the UK applauded NHS workers every Thursday evening (Wood & Skeggs, 2020), helped shape these newfound relationships with neighbours, as participants saw people they did not normally encounter and developed a rapport. This became a social highpoint of the week for several participants, as they looked forward to engaging with this growing "sense of community" (Rebecca, 30, Plymouth).

> It was lovely. All these people, some of them I've never seen before. You know we're all out. It was really nice. Everyone stands in their front gardens or some people are in their windows.

> **Ruby, 62, Surrey**

Many attributed this new sense of closeness – with both existing and new relationships – to the enforced lockdown and hoped that it would continue once they returned to normality.

Despite this positive change, some participants still reported missing their estranged relationships, growing increasingly lonely. Even Dianne, who lived geographically very close to her parents, felt alienated due to the new rules enforcing separation from other households:

> I was quite positive, I was quite motivated […but] the last two weeks it's sort of gone more negative in like the motivation and I've had the stress and the anxiety. […] I think not seeing family members and stuff: they are like my support network, so I think that's what hit me.

Dianne, 32, Stockton-on-Tees

Thus, this enforced separation was not an issue reserved for those who were geographically estranged from loved ones (such as those with family overseas) but felt across the sample by all of those who were no longer able to maintain their relationships in familiar ways, no matter how physically close they were.

Re-establishing the role of CMC

The physical estrangement experienced during this time led to all participants becoming increasingly dependent on computer-mediated communication, as it became an essential part of relationship maintenance. All participants reported using CMC to some extent prior to lockdown, but also noted that they adopted new platforms and forms of CMC during lockdown to engage with multiple networks:

> I feel like I'm chatting to my family more than I ever have […] we're doing it in different ways to what we normally would as well. […] I've been using *WhatsApp* video [with] my mum […] I've been using *Zoom*, I've got like a regular call with some of my friends that live all across the UK. […] And then I've been using *Facebook Messenger* with another group of friends.

Kim, 30, Nottinghamshire

These participants either extended their use of pre-existing applications or adopted and learned how to use new services in efforts to match the intimacy of face-to-face communication. This was typically prompted by loved ones as they encouraged each other to find new ways to engage. As such, relationships motivated an increase in access to and adoption of different forms of CMC, promoting opportunities to build media literacy and widen media engagement.

All participants noted an increased use of instant messaging service *WhatsApp*. It was appreciated for its multimedia forms of communication, private and group conversations and user-friendly interface (also noted by Miller 2016; Chambers 2017). The group feature especially was considered a welcome novelty for those who wanted to connect with multiple family generations at once:

> I started setting daily challenges on [our family group chat]. I started each day saying: "name three favourite Disney films" and then the next day, "your three favourite comedies" and then "your three favourite songs from musicals". […] And the lovely thing about that is seeing everybody chip in with all their things.
>
> **Dana, 57, Devon**

Video-calling – especially via the platform *Zoom*, which was almost unanimously adopted across the sample because of lockdown – quickly became a key means for socialising. Again, the use of video calling generated a sense of community, especially for participants who regularly socialised via video:

> Oh it is lovely [speaking to my family on *Zoom*]. It's lovely, very nice. […] You're so used to seeing it on the telly now with all the different screens, it seems quite natural.
>
> **Dana, 57, Devon**

Dana's apparent familiarity with the "natural" video-call was motivated by her sons encouraging regular virtual 'meet-ups' with the family, meaning they quickly became part of her routine.

Replicating offline processes with online activities

While participants discussed missing *people*, it was evident that many also missed the *processes* that they associated with relationships. For instance, Paula missed the social opportunities that followed baby classes with her one-year-old son:

> Before I was like going to baby groups and meeting up with other mums, going for coffees and things. I haven't really got that social circle sort of thing anymore.
>
> **Paula, 31, Sussex**

Paula had only recently established this social group as a new mum, and was worried that through the loss of the activity she had also lost an entire friendship group. Thus, lockdown threatened new "weak tie" relationships, before they had the opportunity to develop into stronger ties that could endure such disruption (Chambers, 2013).

Ruby also missed the routines and rituals that came with socialising face to face, feeling nostalgic for the day out that accompanied visiting her 94-year-old dad:

> That's actually the thing I miss the most is going to see my dad, not even just seeing him, but the actual - I've been doing it for years: driving up the M25. I enjoy the day

out to dinner and my little routine of taking him to Tesco.

Ruby, 62, Surrey

While relationships were the anchor and reason for these processes, the wider activities associated with these meetings also added to the overall positive experiences, making participants nostalgic for the actions and places that led to such interactions. Consequently, participants identified the activities that typically shaped socialising in offline settings and attempted to replicate them in online spheres. For instance, Amelia and her boyfriend used *WhatsApp* calls to watch television "together". She noted that this derived from a desire for intimacy, not just for communication:

> Quite a lot of like meaningful interaction and relationship is also through not talking and just like being with each other, and I think because you can't do that, it's nice to be able to have a video chat but not be centred on kind of like continuously talking about things, especially when there's not that much to talk about in terms of being stuck in the house, and of course you don't want to talk about bad stuff.

Amelia, 29, Yorkshire

For Amelia, the recreation of the act of watching TV with her boyfriend provided a sense of normality, especially as light-hearted conversation could be difficult during the anxious time of lockdown.

Others also tried to replicate social occasions online by instigating family quizzes, game nights or drinks with friends online. Paula (31, Sussex) discussed her and her sister setting up a game of *Pictionary* the first time they video-called their parents in lockdown, and Carol suggested reinstating 'girls nights' with her friends:

> I kind of said "do you fancy a girls night, but virtually, via *WebEx*?" and it worked really nicely. […] We all had glasses of gin as we would have done if we were in person […] so we're replicating a girls' night.

Carol, 41, Buckinghamshire

Finally, three participants attempted to reproduce activities often deemed an integral part of a normal weekly routine. For instance, Amelia used the social network *House Party* to conduct regular workouts:

> We created this morning workout in which all the morning people that attended 7am *CrossFit* workouts would still workout together, but we do it on *House Party*, some working out in their gardens, some in their living rooms.

Amelia, 29, Yorkshire

Carol reported that some of her children's extracurricular classes were transferred online. Like Amelia, this created a sense of normality and provided a routine:

> There's a virtual swim squad, so every morning we're still up early to do swim specific yoga, believe or not, at 8 o'clock every morning. So, we do that all as a family […] then everybody gets changed, gets breakfast, scrabbles around to start at 9 where we can at least start the working day and the school day.

> **Carol, 41, Buckinghamshire**

Thus, the replication of familiar interactions became a prime coping mechanism for some participants, providing a degree of consistency and ritual in uncertain times.

Online social discomfort

While these attempts to replicate offline activities in online spaces were successful for some, other – noticeably all the male – participants discussed feeling uncomfortable with these efforts. Although they valued the opportunity to socialise, online communication was often considered too detached from familiar face-to-face contact. Aaron, for instance, rejected his workmates' attempts to set up a video-call meet-up:

> I didn't think it would be very good, a bit more awkward. […] The inherent thing about having a conversation with those four is the concept of being in a pub with a beer in your hand sort of thing. It's not the same. […] Just bit contrived, really.

> **Aaron, 45, Surrey**

His worry that the online activity would be awkward connected to his scepticism that they could not recreate pre-existing relationship rituals. Aaron associated his relationship with his workmates with visiting the local pub together and having a drink. Without these, he feared their interactions online would be forced, unnatural.

Some felt that the subtleties of F2F conversation – where one could read other people's moods, create a rapport, and confide in each other – were unattainable online. For instance, Kieran felt apprehensive about "meeting" his friends online as they – like Aaron – were more familiar with a pub setting:

> When it's a kind of banter and people interrupting as they do in the pub, and over-shouting each other and getting excited about arguments and stuff like that. […It's] very different interaction and it's a learned form of interaction […] I would imagine that if you compare interaction socially amongst that group of people in a pub as

opposed to online, it will be very, very different.

Kieran, 72, Yorkshire

A lack of clear social norms online made these unfamiliar interactions feel stressful, occasionally inhibiting participants as they struggled to participate in online group settings. In fact, many noted that video-calling especially could feel awkward, as the natural rhythm of conversation was disrupted by both infrastructural issues (such as poor internet quality) and social uncertainty (such as unclear etiquette):

> It's difficult sometimes to read people. If you're stood with someone then you can get a very clear read on if we're happy, if they're sad, listening to you, whether they agree with you, disagree. […but on video calls] you can't get the read on just normal social norms.
>
> **Jasper, 39, Nottinghamshire**

> I don't really like *House Party*. It depends on everyone's internet connections, and people talk over each other. […] So I normally just sit there and listen […] I'm trying to hear four people at the same time, it can be a bit tricky.
>
> **Dianne, 32, Stockton-on-Tees**

Finally, participants reported feeling increased social anxiety during this time. This was especially the case with those who were regularly engaging with social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Instagram,* as they were able to observe their friends interacting with one another. This occasionally led to exclusion, where they discovered they were not invited to certain 'events' that their friends had created online:

> You can feel further isolated during social isolation: [we] sort of tentatively arranged to do something for my friend's birthday [over video-call]. Later that evening I saw on their social media posts and stories that they were going through with what the tentative plan was, but only with one set of their friends. […] So that made me quite upset and made me feel sort of alone and like, I've managed to be ditched over social media. […] At the time it made me feel very alone and very sad and frustrated.
>
> **Ken, 30, Lancashire**

Dianne (32, Stockton-on-Tees) also noted this sense of social exclusion, reporting that it was so upsetting sometimes that "it's like taking a toll, isn't it, on like mental health […] So I started to just like ignore that group message", removing herself from her group of friends on

social media. Despite participants wanting to use computer-mediated communication to resolve their sense of loneliness during lockdown, some attempts to socialise actually exacerbated the problem, causing them to further distance themselves. Therefore, while CMC was a vital tool for socialising, its use could also be the cause of isolation for some.

Conclusion

The use of computer-mediated communication became an increasingly normalised part of everyday life long before 2020. This led to an academic rejection of the narrative that online communication was supplanting relationships, as CMC use became a crucial means for connecting online and offline communication (Baym 2010; Rainie & Wellman 2012; Miller 2016; Parks 2017). However, lockdown forced participants to use computer-mediated communication to replace face-to-face interaction in a new and unexpected manner. The research presented in this article captures a moment in time where some relationships *were* separated between online and offline in a clearer manner than they had been in decades. For once, F2F interactions were not always supported by CMC, and online interactions *were* supplanting offline.

This disruption impacted the study participants in varied ways: some embraced this new way of communicating, moving a number of previous interactions online and hoping that some of the new experiences carved during this time would continue after lockdown (such as regular communication with distant friends). They also found new opportunities to appreciate their time together within their household, renegotiating their dynamics and prioritising quality time together. Lockdown made participants re-evaluate the importance of their relationships, with Ruby (62, Surrey) noting "that's the only thing that really matters: your relationships with other people and that they are alright".

However, the majority of the participants struggled with this enforced separation. It was evident that 'relationships' were more than just communication between two people: they are the catalyst for comforting and routine interactions, and the absence of these familiar routines could make interaction feel forced, unnatural. Despite its crucial role, this unexpected dependence on new forms of CMC left many feeling disconcerted or isolated. All participants reported that while online communication was important, it was not enough to fully replicate their relationships, with Ollie (29, Nottingham) concluding: "I do still miss face-to-face, and that's never going to be replaceable anytime in our lifetime with technology".

CMC was a lifeline for relationships during this time, facilitating relationship maintenance and even strengthening some bonds. However, it was not a sufficient replacement to face-to-face interaction. The enforced need to 'supplant' offline relationships with online communication only highlighted how unnatural this felt to participants. This research illustrates the extent to which people still value the intimacy that comes with F2F interactions. It also illustrates how tenuous and carefully managed our day-to-day

relationships are, where people have unspoken rules and boundaries surrounding interaction with others. This flow between online and offline, computer-mediated and face-to-face interactions has become the normalised expectation for modern-day relationships, and lockdown only highlighted how essential it is to maintain this balance.

Future research

This research captures a moment in time, examining how people in the UK, specifically England, maintained relationships during lockdown in Spring 2020. The snowball recruitment methodology meant that I was not able to access or consider a demographically representative sample. Future research should examine the repercussions this era had for those from a range of backgrounds, including different socio-economic groups and ethnicities. This paper also notes the media literacy implications of people adopting new platforms and technology during lockdown to maintain estranged relationships. It would be beneficial to explore this topic in more detail with those who struggled to access the internet during this time, considering the difficulties they may have encountered and the impact this may have had on their relationships. Finally, there is a need for further research that examines the longer lasting impact this time period may have had on CMC use in relationship management, especially as lockdown continues in varying grades in the UK, and beyond.

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Biography

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Digital Contemplative Community in Pandemic Times

LISETTE E. TORRES, *Nebraska Wesleyan University*

In this collage, I reflect on my Radical Dharma (williams & Owens, 2016) community gatherings, which are led by Zen teacher Rev. angel Kydoo williams, and examine how they are helping me to (re)imagine community and connection during pandemic times. Using the theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit) (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013), I explore through my artwork the following questions: How is COVID-19 changing the way I, as a disabled Latina mother-scholar, relate to others in person and over digital space? Is physical distancing creating more social isolation and separation? Or is it paradoxically making me more attune to the pain, needs, and wants of my fellow beings on this planet? How does this ultimately impact my scholarship?

Through the use of meditation, journaling, and reflecting on our virtual meetings, I tried to express within the collage our coming to terms with change and grief within the context of the pandemic and the current Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests on police brutality. I argue that we are in the midst of creating a virtual fugitive space (Stovall, 2015), as depicted by the center circle of golden leaves, where we can (re)imagine what community can look like post-pandemic through embodied contemplative practice and collective care (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). We are using computer-mediated technology (e.g., Zoom, Slack, Teamwork Projects) to not only work on community mending (Ortiz, 2018) for communities of color, but also their (and our) liberation. The focus on love, intuition, and spiritual beginnings/endings is represented by the pink center of the circle.

What brings me and my fellow meditators together is suffering and our need to collectively mend, even if it is mediated by computers. The red acrylic paint on the top right of the collage symbolizes the blood and death that we have experienced during this pandemic moment. The purple cracks found throughout the work are scars of wounds inflicted. The black handprint is symbolic of the battle for human life, particularly Black lives. Moving down the collage to the bottom right corner, the red transitions to blue acrylic to represent the sweat and tears that have been shed. The blue is also reminiscent of water and drowning, as indicated by the rope and light brown stick figure being saved by the dark brown bodhisattva in the middle of the collage.

Similarly, aside from the center figure, there are two other wounded individuals in the collage. One of them is the aforementioned body that is slightly burned and tied up in rope being rescued; the rope symbolizes struggle, confinement, and feelings of being overwhelmed. The other injured brown figure has their right leg and left arm cut off, with the severed arm extending to the awaiting bodhisattva. The bodhisattva also has wounds, trying to reach out to assist others and wearing a white lotus flower that is beginning to open, representative of the initiation of enlightenment.

The left side of the collage is symbolic of the digital space that I and my Radical Dharma community reside in together. It is designated by the binary code displayed vertically, the bits of circuitry, and the blue decoupage. There is a digital version of the Virgin Mary's Immaculate Heart in the midst of the blue background. The metallic heart has a sword coming out of it and represents undying love for humanity. It also speaks to sorrow and the release of pain; the virtual fugitive space provides our community members a synchronous electronic experience of fellowship and love.

Ultimately, the pandemic has encouraged mindfulness practitioners to use technology to seek one another out and to connect our hearts, minds, and spirits through digital space. We search for individual and collective mending and sensemaking. We realize that computer-mediated interaction is a poor substitute for sharing physical space and contact. However, we are grateful for the opportunity to be together in real time, and we relish hearing the beautiful sound of everyone saying goodbye to each other asynchronously over the wireless network every time we "meet."

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Biography

Dr Lisette E. Torres is a scientist and disabled scholar-activist in the field of higher education. She has a doctorate in Education with a Certificate in Social Justice from Iowa State University and M.S. in Zoology with a Certificate in Ecology from Miami University. Her research focuses on racialized gender justice and disability in science and higher education. Torres is formerly the Director of the Cooper Center at Nebraska Wesleyan University. She now works for TERC, a math and science education research non-profit located in Cambridge, MA. Torres serves as a Lead and Accessibility Editor for Science for the People Magazine (Online) and a co-founder and board member of the National Coalition for Latinxs with Disabilities (CNLD).

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'Digital Contemplative Community in Pandemic Times': Creative Response

KATHERINA RADEVA, *Two Destination Language*

A heart, a hand, a dagger, a flower, and bodies. This is the human experience in one.

As I gaze into this collage, the first thing that comes to mind is TIME.
The time it has taken to plan the symbols it depicts.
Time to map out its space, time to make the choices of colour, the time it has taken to decide when it is finished.

Is it finished?

> *Is*
> > *anything*
> > > *f i n i s h e d?*

> > > > When is it finished?

Time is a process.

And the process is learning, even if the learning at hand is to unlearn.

As invited by the artist/maker, this piece asks of our time, too:

Take the time to gaze, and for that gaze to move and shift.
Take the time to look at the layers.
Take the time to consider the flat surface and the 3D elements.
Take the time to sit with its pain.
Take the time to look for ways to heal.
Take the time to consider ancestry and history, and who wrote said history, who was in charge of the writing, and who was left out of it.

The piece asks of us to pause. To reconnect with practices beyond our mostly linear Western binary thinking, to allow space for multiple ways of being, space to feel pain and space to heal.

And this moment, now, sharply brought into focus by the global COVID-19 pandemic is the time we collectively need to take responsibility to diversify and broaden our parallels of being, to seek new ways of connection, to find healing through community across time and space.

This collage prods us into complexity and finding joy in the layers of history.

Biography

Katherina Radeva is a multi-award-winning theatre maker, visual artist, set and costume designer, and creative director at Two Destination Language. She tours internationally and her visual artwork has been exhibited across Europe and the United States. She is a vocal campaigner for inclusion and diversity and fair pay for arts and cultural workers. Born in Bulgaria, Katherina has lived in the UK for over 20 years as a first-generation migrant.

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Ever-Lockdown: Waiting through Times of Playbour and Pandemic in *Animal Crossing*

MERLIN SELLER, *University of Edinburgh*

ABSTRACT

Animal Crossing: New Horizons' (Nintendo 2020) huge popularity has previously been attributed to escapism prompted by the singularity of lockdown life (Frushtick 2020; Zhu 2020), resonating with analyses which have been quick to frame lockdown as a radical historical caesura in experiences of work and leisure (Harari 2020; Krastev 2020). However, Chmielewski and Bruno argue that lockdown can be seen in relation to continuities in neoliberalism's alienation, isolation and hyperconnected domestic digital labour (Chmielewski 2020; Bruno 2020)—a condition of prolonged and displaced anxiety I term 'ever-lockdown'—necessitating a more nuanced account of *Animal Crossing's* ambivalent mix of busywork and relaxation. Rather than escapist utopia, consumerist dystopia (Chang 2019), or softened capitalism (Bogost 2020), I will consider *Animal-Crossing* as providing absorbing boredom in which intense interactivity can be interpassively (Pfaller 2017) withheld in a time of demanding and destabilising crises, facilitating a subtle, affective sense of place amidst the 'ever-lockdown.'

KEYWORDS

Lockdown, Animal Crossing, playbour, interpassivity, games

Figure 1: Weeds in Animal Crossing: New Horizons (*Nintendo 2020) [Author's screenshot]*

Weeds, weeds, weeds: This was my reckoning as a lapsed but repeat player of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo,2020), and a familiar scene for returning players [Fig. 1]. It's the shadow of regular play—the daily check-in with the slow-life of repose in an island community—regular rhythms, charming greetings, the appreciation of seasonal shifts. Working, weeding and walking—or refusing all the above—the player finds themselves flirting with boredom, anxiety and interpassivity in ways which resonate with our experience of national lockdowns and resist easy explanation. Neither utopian nor dystopian, leisure nor labour, I here argue that this game provides a 'topian' (Olwig 2002) sense of place reflecting on the absurd negations and continuities of life alongside COVID.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons (hereafter *ACNH*)—at first glance kitsch and escapist, on second appraisal mercurial and capitalist—is a game of contradictions. As Bogost reflects on the origins of the series,[1] the game exists in tension between consumption and ecology (2007), but more recent entries are further suspended between slowness and acquisitiveness (Scully-Blaker 2019), escapist play (Zhu 2020) and a serious "political hypothesis" of a future sphere of labour without losers (Bogost 2020). Moreover, the game has enjoyed huge sales success (Batchelor 2020) while offering limited interactivity and, for good or ill, janky (unpredictable) controls (Schmalzer 2020). Harnessed to the slowness and restrictions of a real-time clock it provides play, which, like post-industrial work we cannot completely "turn off" (Scully-Blaker 2019, 97).

Through this case study, this paper addresses experiential continuities under lockdown—a protracted process of alienation, anxiety and isolation at the intersection of domestic play and work which I term the state of 'ever-lockdown.' Here I combine direct analysis with elements of paratextual discourse analysis, supported by theory, to make an argument based on reading this case study and the synthesis of existing scholarship to see *ACNH* in context. Through textual analysis of this game in relation to quotidian activities, I suggest that *ACNH* provides the player with a place in which to dwell and exorcise negative affects while ambivalently resisting the creep of neoliberalism through boredom and interpassivity. Following an extended literature review of work on our current socioeconomic moment and the discourse surrounding the game text, I elaborate my analysis in three moments of single-player experience—the ambiguous atmospherics of 'playbour,' the player's subtle affective relationship to weeds, and the potentials of 'waiting' and 'dwelling' as a mode of affective resistance. I argue that rather than a utopian escape from pandemic reality, or a dystopian capitulation to Capitalism, this game facilitates a complex and subtle affective response to longer-term conditions of alienation and playbour through a quotidian sense of 'place' (Ingold 2010, Olwig 2002, Solnit 2002).

'Ever-lockdown' and *Animal Crossing*

While recent analyses (Harari 2020; Krastev 2020; Žižek, 2020) and popular discourse (Dartnell 2020; Tisdall 2020) have been quick to frame lockdown as a radical historical caesura in (privileged Western) experiences of work and leisure, McCormick frames the social

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[1] Mechanically similar prequels were released 2001-2017 with equivalent core game loops, my interest lies in *ACNH* for the contemporary cultural context in which it emerges, and the graphical advances that afford a sense of place to a greater degree than graphically simpler releases: soft, tactile textures and detailed animation such as the wind blowing through the trees.

experience of COVID as one of 'indefinite liminality' (2020). Despite nationalist rhetoric suggesting phases, conclusions and 'battles', COVID resists definitive narratives and categorical distinctions. Bruno has recently argued that the post-COVID form of neoliberal biopower we are experiencing across the West is actually an acceleration of hyperconnected domestic space, rather than a radical departure (2020). As Soderman notes, using the work of Hochschild (2001), the blurring of boundaries between work and home exposes the already pressing political issues of time and space, which only become more evident during lockdown (Soderman 2017, 53). This fits a pattern of longer and more irregular working hours in recent years (Johnson & Libscomb 2006) and the chronic issue of anxiety disorders which have doubled among young people between 2007-2018 (Duffy et al. 2019) and only been exacerbated during the COVID-19 epidemic (Twenge & Joiner 2020). Work, leisure, public spheres, private spheres, sociality and isolation are all anxiously fused in homes which act as sites of labour, care and play—but for our increasingly immaterial labour, our 'bullshit jobs' (Graeber 2018) and networked social lives, we can see this as representing continuity rather than a radical break: a condition I term 'ever-lockdown.'

Before the pandemic, argues Chmielewski, we (in the privileged West) already lived in heavily abstract, distanced societies of urban isolation and alienation—what has been lost in the pandemic is 'only' the last sliver of notional contact in our increasingly impoverished and heavily mediated social lives (2020, 377). Indeed, even Žižek, in discussing the potential for radical post-pandemic futures suggested by state interventionism, opens and concludes his book *Pan(dem)ic!* with poignant continuities in labour: the fact that most blue-collar jobs continue regardless of risk especially outside of the privileged West (2020, 17-29); and that those who fear the pandemic most are those of us whose lives have changed the least (2020, 107-114). Already working from home renders the threat intangible and, without visible markers of change in our everyday routines, the subject of exponential fantasy. As Žižek reflects on his own life, referencing a Lubitsch joke: 'Prior to the crisis, it was an isolation "without milk"—I could have gone out, I just chose not to. Now it's just the plain coffee of isolation with no possible negation implied' (Žižek 2020, 108). What COVID highlights, therefore, is that we were already in a form of alienated neoliberal lockdown. Protesting a loss of 'authentic' contact in our current Zoom/Teams lives can thus be seen as a displaced mourning of the fact that many of us were already largely working and playing digitally in a fourth industrial revolution which has already been 'blurring the line between the physical, digital and biological spheres' (Schwab 2016, n.p.).

Digital Humanities work attests to the commodification and mediation of vast swathes of our social lives and interactions (Kingwell 2019), a condition of surveillance capitalism which seeks to maximise the productive potential of every moment through technological interfaces in all manner of work and domestic spaces (Moore et al. 2018). The rise of networked technologies has for years also been logistically shifting economies of attention from public venues of production and entertainment to the living room and digital devices—phones, computers, consoles, VR, speakers and TVs have all already turned domestic space inside-out (Snickars & Vonderau 2009; Fleury et al. 2020); and Kücklich, Boellstorff and Taylor have shown that games have a history of combining work and play in increasingly complex and pervasive game worlds (Kücklich 2005; Boellstorff 2013; Taylor 2018). The folk taxon of the infinitely playable 'ever-game' (Bowman 2019, 155-6) thus grows to meet the long trajectory

of the 'ever-lockdown.'

In this context, the meteoric success of *Animal Crossing's* slow, task-driven busywork presents itself as an intriguing space of play and labour, analogous to 'playbour' (Kücklich 2005), articulating a living-room-office always already in lockdown. Here, while player efforts are not directly co-opted as game development, player engagement with *ACNH's* has fed into hosted virtual marketing strategies, streaming culture, the aftermarket for assets sold between players and representationally its internal economy and repetitious loops are a salient example of how leisure has incorporated work from in-game mortgage payment to *ACNH's* fictive phone apps (the surveillance-capitalist device *de jour*). Indeed, *ACNH* is a platform for corporate advertising campaigns and brand-tie-ins aimed at replicating physical experiential campaigns through multiplayer use of its islands (Liffreing 2020). As Kang et al. (2020) identify, a renewed white flight during COVID has also seen many affluent Americans move to work-from-home in the countryside, co-locating pastoral, domestic and labouring lives. Perhaps, then, we can see the virtual turn to the countryside village as a similar imaginative trajectory—not just an escape, but a change of dwelling, and with it a modulation of work-from-home. Ian Bogost points the way to recognising some of the ambivalent and mundane nature of player desire here: 'Nobody really wants to live a pastoral-capitalist equilibrium of humdrum labour—unless that's what everyone wants, actually, and not even so secretly' (2020)—but does this attachment really point to a hopeful playbouring future as Bogost has it, or to our boring 'indefinite liminality?' Do we really stay for the Capitalism, or does this game speak in different ways to our 'ever-lockdown'?

Animal Crossing's popularity has been critically framed as a cure to lockdown's assumed 'cabin fever' (Frushtick 2020; MacDonald 2020; Zhu 2020). Enjoying huge commercial success following its release during lockdown on March 20, 2020, it topped the sales charts for the medium as a whole, selling 4 million copies in its first weeks of release in Japan alone (Batchelor 2020), and 26 million in total at the time of writing (Yeung 2020), enmeshing it in the global COVID economy. Yet this franchise has for much of existence remained a niche experience. To outsiders, particularly to the hegemonic masculine-coded hardcore gamer who demands challenge, risk and complex interactivity (Juul 2009; Chess 2017), *ACNH* is puzzling, uninteresting and even aggravating. As Lantz, director of the *NYU Game Center* describes *ACNH*: 'It is the most boring, long-winded, repetitive, condescending, infantile bullshit we've ever seen' (2020 cited Bogost 2020). Yet while *prima facie* the game's promise of a tropical island to craft and share at your leisure might suggest its success stems from affording a pastoral retreat from quarantine reality (Frushtick 2020), I argue that explaining this games' sensational and counter-intuitive success needs to engage more deeply with its subtle affects. this evergreen 'ever-game' (Bowman 2019) of open play resonates strongly and strangely with the deep continuities of 'ever-lockdown' in which work and leisure have always already been co-located and hypermediated.

ACNH situates the player as the community leader of a small, relaxing island of anthropomorphic animals, following diurnal rhythms tied to a real-time/real-world clock. With a simple control scheme and small pool of player verbs we spend as much time waiting as 'doing,' and thanks to the *Switch* platform's portability it can readily function as an example of what Keogh and Richardson term the 'background' or 'ambient' game (2018). Our principal activities in *ACNH* are gradual and piecemeal—collection, commerce, crafting and

conversation—everything can be sold, but with minimal pressure for us to buy anything what becomes more of a goal in this largely goalless game is the emotional satisfaction of our community and ourselves through discourse, decoration and the donation of specimens to our local museum. This is a game visually characterised by soft pastel colours and velveteen textures, unfurling for us like a scroll with the dramatic curvature of a horizon that yields steady, soft surprises.

However, the pressures of real-time—a key political terrain in 'ever-lockdown'—enmeshes this gentle game with the compromises of surveillance capitalism. As Scully-Blaker observes: '[in] an interesting reversal of the idea that one can never quite 'turn off' from their working life […] one is altogether incapable of 'turning off' the game's monitoring of their play' (2019, 97). The ambient weight of our island dwelling's mortgage, and the clear exchange value of every object, leads Chang to argue that the game perpetuates thinly veiled 'logics of consumerism and capital accumulation' (2019, 70). Indeed, *ACNH's* overt fictive monetisation of player activity has even inspired its use as a humorous illustration of real-world median wages from the *United States Bureau of Labor Statistics*. But as Scully-Baker observes: '…*Animal Crossing's* capitalism is so overt that I would argue it operates against the player ever becoming some sort of cultural dupe' (Scully-Blaker 2019, 98). Indeed, as hinted at in my brief summary of the game, our island is as much a gift economy as a profit-driven one, with animals regularly sending us objects with the expectation of respectful reciprocity based on preferences not prices, to say nothing of the player's civic duties of benefaction through public works and museum acquisition.

If not a Capitalist simulacrum, what then does this space provide for the millions who now live there? Bogost identifies more complexity in the series which he characterises as an unresolved conflict between consumerism and ecological awareness (2007), and more recently as a playful amelioration of capitalist labour (2020). In the latter analysis, *ACNH* gestures to a future with 'no losers,' in which all activity is monetarily rewarded, creating a world of small dreams and mundane activities that nonetheless allow the player to: 'Imagine if everyone had a job that they enjoyed, that they were good at, and that could sustain them' (Bogost 2020). More radically, this idea of play which sustains us through mundane rituals has been explored by Stone (2018) in terms of affect, citing *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo 2013) as articulating and potentially redressing Lauren Berlant's concept of 'slow death' (2011, 95)— the forgettable, everyday but deeply important work of survival and maintenance in a mental/physical state of deterioration and being worn out. Indeed, if COVID draws our attention to slow death, what does *ACNH's* endlessly ticking model of playbour with 'no losers'—and perforce no winners—mean for our affective lives in ever-lockdown?

Rather than Zhu's escapist utopia, Chang's consumerist dystopia, or Bogost's softened capitalism, I read *Animal Crossing* as a usefully absorbing boredom in which intense interactivity can be happily withheld in a time of prolonged and intangible crisis. Through the procedural generation of tasks and their slow, boring but comforting elaboration (or equally possible rejection), *Animal Crossing* reflects on eerily familiar playbour with a meandering, flowering of processes and materials. By interpassively mediating and displacing work as something both boring and comforting *ACNH* helps materialise the fuzzy alienation of the ever-lockdown through practices and entanglements of growing, caring and dwelling.

ACNH is a complex malleable single-player and multiplayer world that elapses over the course of months, and so to focus my analysis I will look at three areas of player (non)interactivity drawing on personal experience after several weeks of play: our relation to currency, plants and boredom, and perambulatory (non)actions of walking and waiting in the topian space between utopia and dystopia.

Playbour and Atmosphere

In order to firmly establish the groundwork of activity and affect in this game, we need to dig deeper into the subtle and ambiguous atmospherics of *ACNH's* work and play. Early on in their island life, players of *ACNH* finds themselves in receipt of a fictive smartphone, and with it an endless litany of redeemable tasks—from planting flowers to picking mushrooms, all paid for in the currency of 'Nook Miles' which can be used to acquire goods, services and resources. *ACNH* contains many dubious tasks from (im)balancing developed space and nature to increase your island's star rating to thematically restrained interior decoration aimed at increasing a 'Happy Home Academy' score that Bogost has argued ambivalently: *'attempts to persuade the player to understand both the intoxication of material acquisition and the subtle pleasures of abstention'* (Bogost 2007, 275). However, as pure exchange value, Nook Miles encourage no such stoicism or balance. While the currency might reflect Bogost's dream where we 'Imagine if everyone had a job that they enjoyed, that they were good at, and that could sustain them' (2020), monetizing tasks such as taking a photo or planting a flower also resonate with Graeber's concept of the real-world 'bullshit job': 'It's as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs just for the sake of keeping us all working' (2018). As we build our islands to entertain our animals, ourselves and our friends, we engage in what Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter identify as the immaterial labour of intellectual and affective creation: 'a blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure, creating a continuum of productivity, and of exploitability,' (2009, 23) placing *ACNH* in closer sympathy with our world of work than Huizinga's (1998) tired model of play's escapist magic circle. But is there really no unalienated space over the horizon, does the algorithm condemn us to work for work's sake?

With Jenkins' writing on gendered spaces of play and the decline of the childhood backyard (2006), we might see our island in relation to Victorian boys' adventure literature as a Robinson Crusoe narrative— but our work here is much more banal than adventurous, and a project of community empathy rather than individualist bourgeois domination. In terms of gender, then, *ACNH* might more productively fit within the designed identity of 'Player 2' as Chess identifies in games of cleaning and affective labour targeted at women, never allowing the player uninhibited leisure (2017, 59-61). Indeed, *ACNH's* players engage in a range of affective labour that encompasses the diffusing of NPC arguments, celebration and gifting, and responses to passive aggressive comments in person and through the weight of automated in-game mail.

More compellingly than Jenkins' model of a 'boy's adventure,' in our tiny aesthetic projects and meditative busywork we might instead find affinity with Jenkins' assessment of *Animal Crossing* as a game of emotional encounters: 'an endless jolt of surprise or (if you will) a video game of player-generated secret attractions' (2007, n.p.). However, this too is not without its ambiguities. NPCs can make surprises as much as players—through decoration, behaviour, nicknames and seasonal events—while the Nook Miles system also proceduralise the player's

work of making 'secrets', leaving us with something between surprise and boredom, agency and passivity. What still applies from Jenkins' assessment of older *Animal Crossings* though, is an intriguing emphasis on the series' affordances of 'atmospheric manipulations' (2007, n.p.)—from gardening to terraforming—which evokes Bogost's contemporaneous interest in the game's relationship of 'material things to intangible sensations' (Bogost 2007, 274-5). This atmosphere, affectively connecting player mood to the finicky core creative mechanics of positioning objects in a landscape, can generate both mundane spaces of episodic work in a capitalist world (Stone 2018), as well as subversive spaces of jankiness and unintended consequence (Schmalzer 2020).

Weeds and Subtle Affects

These atmospherics tangle the player in a mix of subtle affects and sense of place: from the listlessness of repetition to the mild panic of lost time with the sight of a visually fictive but temporally real sunset over the horizon; from a breeze that makes the whole island shiver and tingle with delight to the comfort of gardening rituals that change with the seasons. While the popularity and pedigree of this game leads theorists to make dramatic claims for *Animal Crossing's* emancipatory or oppressive affordances, this is fundamentally a game of soft feelings and everyday activities. From sending and receiving letters with your animal friends to picking and pruning at a world of flora, this is also crucially an atmosphere at the periphery of the human and non-human world—and it is with weeds and weeding that we can see how *ACNH* really reflects the subtle affective atmosphere of the 'ever-lockdown.'

In recent years there has been a growing literature on affect in games beyond immediate disciplinary concerns with 'immersion' and 'fun' (Perron and Schröter eds 2016; Isbister 2016) and here I use 'affect' in the feminist and queer theory, phenomenological and non-cognitivist sense of Anable's *Playing with Feelings* as the dynamic: "cultural expression of underrepresented feelings (2018, xviii). A common feeling of lapsed players is guilt at the expected morass of plant matter on their return (See Carpenter 2020)—fear that weeds will have taken over, as if their growth displaces us. Indeed, as Mabey writes of weeds in Western culture, they represent something unruly, unwanted and parasitic, however, he cautions us that in reality humans and weeds flourish together: 'Weeds thrive in the company of humans. They aren't parasites, because they can exist without us, but we are their natural ecological partners, the species alongside which they do best' (2010,12). This co-flourishing is indeed possible in *ACNH* where, unlike previous instalments in the series, the game passes no explicit negative judgement on the player who leaves their weeds alone [Fig. 1], and for some players weeds are beautiful and actively fostered (Parrish 2020). Weeds emblematise the ambivalence of a game Bogost rightly argues allows us to work hard or not at all (Bogost 2020), and as he notes, the plant motif of a nibbled leaf that identifies most game objects speaks to a fundamental ephemerality of things in *Animal Crossing* (2007, 272). We can sit and watch the weeds grow, spreading over the island, wafting gently in the wind, or we can prune to our heart's content, slowly, deliberately and repetitively stooping to pick up foliage and garden our world into bloom. We can even leave the game's equivalent of 'stocks' (turnips) to rot in the sun. Much as Scully-Blaker writes of a mode of engaging with *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp's* general mechanics, there is space here for 'radical slowness' in a game series they argue is unusual in

punishing you more for running than for idleness (2019, 96). As the historian Solnit reflects, slow pacing of the landscape has useful affordances in anxious times: 'I like walking because it is slow, and I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought, or thoughtfulness.' (2001, 18).
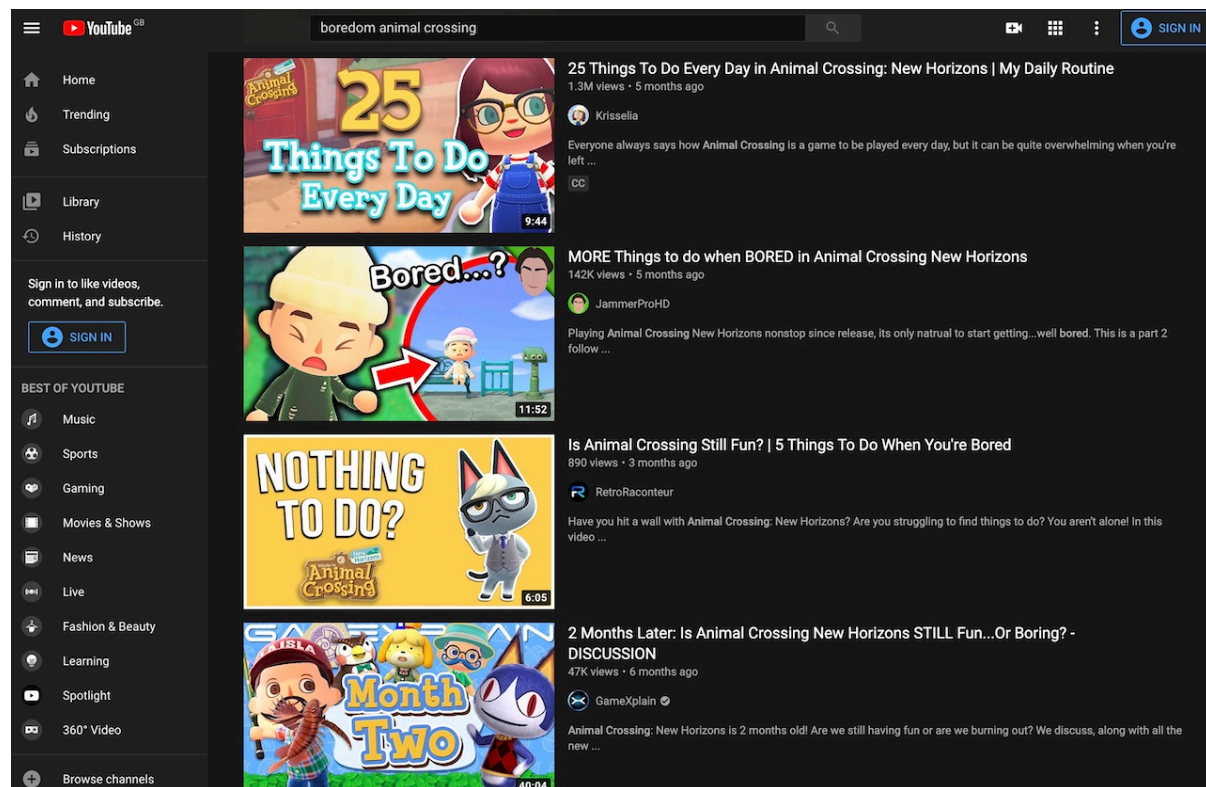

Figure 2: YouTube search indicative of fan discourse correlating boredom and Animal Crossing *URL: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=animal+crossing+boredom [Accessed 23/11/2020]*

Our actions in *ACNH* often involve waiting and watching by default—our interventions are often minor notes, a soft touch: the shaking of trees, the slow and simple rhythms of bug-catching and fruit-picking which involve a careful eye, picking our risk-free moment. The monotony and endlessness of weeds and weeding, however, as magnified by the game's general atmospheric rhythms of repetition and repose, can leave the player with frequent moments of boredom. Interestingly, a simple YouTube search [Fig. 2] reveals *ACNH* to be both a widespread source of and solution to boredom, and critical commentary highlight this unusual ambivalence: '*Animal Crossing: New Horizons* Is an Escape Into Comforting Boredom' (Urquhart 2020); '*Animal Crossing* Game Helps Cure Quarantine Boredom, Anxiety During Pandemic' (Chery 2020).[2] There exists, then, a soft and intriguing tension between the boring monotony of island processes that push players away and the comforts and

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[2] It is worth noting in passing that the use of streaming platforms has accelerated during lockdown in a mode which has become habitual (Gupta and Singharia 2021). Though this is beyond the scope of this article, see Taylor (2018) and Gekker (2018) for more on the implications of streaming 'let's plays' etc. of games specifically.

attractions this 'boring' regularity also affords.

Hand writes of digital boredom as an increasingly common condition in the West, an intensification brought about by Capitalism (Gardiner and Haladyn eds 2017). For Fisher, however, our digital lives give us reason to be nostalgic for boredom as a stable state of total absorption now denied us by neoliberalism's anxious state of perpetual distraction and displacement (2016, 688-90). In Fisher's account everything has become boring, but everyone is stimulated just enough by the compulsions of digital interactivity that they are never bored. Rather than the boring monotony of labour in the early 20th-century, work offers engagement and opportunity but is fundamentally characterised by precarity, disturbance and anxiety. As Meyrowitz has written of digital media: they offer us a world of possibility, but they can deprive us of the security afforded by a stable sense of place (1987).

Perhaps this explains the tension of *ACNH's* banality—its boredom is an attractive alternative to anxiety, an opportunity to be absorbed. Indeed, if ever-lockdown reflects an upward trend in anxiety rather than boredom, we should be attentive to whether games anxiously distract us or give us space to be bored. Soderman, analysing more intensive games of busywork, argues that games like *Diner Dash* seem to kill dead time—but for people with no time to be bored, all they offer is the substitution of anxiety with a more pleasurable form of anxiety (Soderman 2017). The embrace of boredom, then, becomes a subversive alternative to anxious distraction—it takes the form of waiting, of dwelling in a place that is both uncomfortable and resistant to anxious displacement in 'The modern world of people cast adrift, unanchored by the securities of place…' (Solnit 2001, 160).

As the philosopher of boredom Svendsen argues, processing affects takes the time that modernity deprives us of, making staying with boredom crucial: 'Nowadays, where efficiency is one of the great buzz words, we prefer everything to move at a brisk pace, but that is not how things are when it comes to processing that which deeply affects us. That *must* take time' (Svendsen 2005, 145-146). Wark might agree with Soderman that games replicate the conditions of neoliberalism rather than offering an alternative, to the extent that she sees our fraught lives as a fundamentally gamified 'gamespace': 'The utopian dream of liberating play from the game, of a pure play beyond the game, merely opened the way for the extension of gamespace into every aspect of everyday life' (2007, 16). Yet, in her analysis, boredom in play is a rupture with playbour, a source of resistance: 'Boredom lays waste to the appeal of the game as game, and calls attention to the ambiguous relation of game to gamespace.' (2007, 33). As such, boredom is subversive, an affect that points to a place outside of neoliberalism, and in the ever-lockdown boredom may just be the uncomfortable, strange horizon beyond which exists a less alienated world with time to feel.

Waiting and Resisting

Figure 3: Waiting in Animal Crossing: New Horizons *(Nintendo 2020) [Author's screenshot]*

ACNH here becomes a subtle reflection on the subject-position of the player, a quiet place to be, as they watch for shooting stars, repeat NPC conversations, wait for the next event, or see the breeze flow through the trees [Fig. 3]. Moreover, the self-propagation of weeds and flowers returns us to issues of agency in a game of minimal demands—a game of waiting, walking and reading. This world moves without us, ticking slowly with its internal clock—where does this leave the bored player? Keogh has keenly contested the idea that videogames are necessarily interactive media, critiquing Game Studies' focus on action, and noting the frequency of waiting and observing narrative cutscenes, extended animation sequences and even cautious hiding in agonistic games (2019, 976-7). Even more radically, Fizek and Gekker have drawn on Pfaller and Žižeks' concept of interpassivity to argue that in some genres, players delegate their enjoyment (Fizek 2018b), and even that players can resist playbour by rejecting interactivity (Gekker 2018). Through their work we can see the condition of 'interpassivity' present in kinds of distracted and bored player, building on Pfaller's definition of the 'anti-ideological' refusal of interactivity: 'the pleasure in letting others [here the game] consume (instead of work) in one's place' (2017, 1), allowing us to 'opt out' of playbour and, as Žižek has it, use digital space to 'gain a minimum of distance' toward our fantasies by externalising them (1998, 511). Much as recording television might obviate the need to watch it, or a laugh-track might laugh for us, the automatic perambulation of our villagers and the self-perpetuation of our in-game plants might 'enjoy' for us through an interpassive relationship: 'interpassivity is as much about ritual and habit as it is about actual use' (Gekker 2018, 224).

Through interpassivity, players are not dupes believing consciously that a game can play itself for us, but rather we attribute this belief to a non-existent naive other, creating what Pfaller calls an 'illusion without a subject' that configures a game as a self-fulfilling object that can enjoy on our behalf (2017, 59). In *ACNH* we live in hope that our villagers' perennial happiness will rub off on us, that their naive joy is contagious, and even if we don't believe it, it does. From this strange disposition comes powerful and ambivalent affordances which echo boredom's dispassionate absorption and subversive rejection of anxious engagement:

'interpassivity attempts to embed passivity within the interactive relation, which may be interpreted both as loyalty to the system, and as a form of resistance' (Van Oenen 2008, 15).

Moreover, we might understand interpassive *ACNH* as a means of externalising and resisting another illusion without a subject: our fantasy of pre-lockdown life. It mediates the ever-lockdown anxiety we find hard to pin-down in times of COVID—an anxiety that stems from a denial. As Žižek argues, for all that we might be cynically aware of our alienated existence under capitalism, we continue as if we are not: 'the emperor is naked and the media trumpet forth this fact, yet nobody seems really to mind—that is, people continue to act as if the emperor is not naked' (Žižek 1999, 18). No one believes that our lives are great under capitalism and that nothing is wrong with neoliberal society, unless we all do. We outsourced that belief to a naive other and continued our lives as if nothing were amiss until the pandemic broke our illusion in ways we struggle to process. As Bogost has it, no-one would believe we desire boring capitalism, unless we all do (2020). But while Bogost comes close to the displacement at work here, the affective boredom and passivity of play in *ACNH* is not a satisfaction with moderated capitalism, but a denial of being moved by it. Enjoying *ACNH* interpassively lets us opt out of the ever-lockdown, letting our splendid island isolation exist as a ritual of boring plenitude in which to wait with our affects. Our bored interpassivity thus defends us against Fisher's anxious, distracted modernity, Wark's gamespace and McCormick's 'indefinite liminality': the burden of leisure and labour in the ever-lockdown. This isn't a simple escape from pandemic reality, but a game that facilitates a complex and subtle affective response, and resistance, to longer-term conditions of alienation and playbour. Rather than a retreat, *ACNH* is a 'place' to dwell on the horizon of everyday entanglements in ever-lockdown.

Staying in Place

As the player sits down and waits for *ACNH's* wandering musician to conclude their week, and this analysis reaches its own end, the player and the reader are still pacing back-and-forth through the weeds. *ACNH* offers no grand final reckoning, but the ambivalently pleasing horizon of many more sunrises and sunsets to come. In the words of one player: 'When times are so dark, people are just looking for something that's not necessarily going to fix everything but to just make things a bit better, temporarily' (Jess 2020 cited Chalk & Powell 2020). As we've seen, discourse on videogames can tend to treat them as modernist utopian tools of progressive futures, or postmodern virtual conditions of escape, but *ACNH* is no capitalist dystopia, nor is it a post-capitalist utopia—it's a place to dwell in. Our island is not so much a terrain to exploit as a place to live, with all life's ambivalences, fulfilling a spatial function of games whereby: 'The individual player can experience the game space as a place for dwelling rather than merely a territory' (Nitsche 2008, 193).

To conclude I would like to draw on Olwig's thoughts on place and modernity—that we should move beyond modernism's utopianism and postmodernism's dystopianism to a 'topianism' (which is to say a sense of place) that realises the need to create places that can be lived in (2002)—dwelling, walking and waiting in the landscape are the summation of *ACNH's* quiet, topian radicalism. This game, with its messy, boring, calming compromises is not then an object set in opposition to the world, but in Ingold's sense a 'thing,' 'a place where several goings on become entwined' (2010, 4). And much as Solnit reflects:

> 'When you give yourself to places, they give you yourself back; the more one comes to know them, the more one seeds them with the invisible crop of memories and associations that will be waiting for you when you come back, while new places offer up new thoughts, new possibilities.' (Solnit 2002, 22)

The looping world of *Animal Crossing* is not an escape from our world, but an entanglement with continuities and the problematic, gradual creep of our neoliberal ever-lockdown—enabling an interpassive response to our anxiety in an ever-lockdown age that accentuates longer trends of abstracted life and the penetration of work into domestic play. Rather than offering us direct alternatives to, or reifications of, ever-lockdown, *ACNH* allows us to walk, wait and reflect on subtle affects and to grow in place with our plants. What this game taps into is not a fear of radical changes in work and leisure in a time of pandemic, but a displaced awareness of the long journey to where we are now, exorcising our anxieties about the progression of neoliberalism. The first affective shift towards a better future, this is not a utopia nor a dystopia but somewhere off the beaten path with the horizon always in our eye-line. In a world that disturbs and disquiets, *ACNH* is not a retreat, but a means of staying in place.

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Biography

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Transient Feelings: Autoethnographic vignettes on digital intimacy and interiority

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ABSTRACT

In response to the shifts of communication following the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, this research investigates the disorienting experience of navigating loneliness and intimacy in the digital space. Creative writing is a relatively unexplored but recently emerging field of academic inquiry (Skains 2018, 84). Poetry in particular involves research into the language and textures of the world—it is a critical way of thinking that incorporates not just the signified meaning of words, but also the phonaesthetics, placement, space, and textual structure. This practice-based creative work is presented in the form of a nine-part autoethnographic prose poem that echoes the fragmented and asynchronous nature of digital communication (Bonner 2016, 11). Through stream-of-consciousness vignettes that could be read in any order, I emulate the experience of scrolling through a feed. I explore ideas of limitlessness in the face of apocalyptic endings, where our desire for more is troubled by having too much. This experimental and experiential paper is ultimately an interrogation of the tension between affective relations and isolation, where mediated bodies are troubled by longing, loneliness, and looking.

KEYWORDS

Intimacy, Loneliness, Affect, Autoethnography, Poetry

i.

When I was sixteen I coded my *Tumblr* blog to have an infinite scroll because I couldn't stand the sight of those page numbers, lined up like insects beside small arrows that said < *go backwards* or *go forwards* > I wanted to lie down and not go anywhere, just float aimlessly and feed my desire for limitlessness. The mechanism of scrolling is always punctuated by the snap of a wrist, in which I machine my body the way I animal love, or grief. I swallow everything in a series of bite-sized descriptions: palm against cool surface / metal on skin / scroll into endless abyss / soak, repeat.

ii.

In *Abbey*, Mitski says: *I am hungry I have been hungry I was born hungry What do I need?*

I listen to this song while lying on the living room floor almost every night, wondering how many essays you can write about your favourite singer before it becomes suffocating. In her study of Asian American asociality in the works of Mitski and Ocean Vuong, Summer Lee Kim states, 'to be an Asian American woman is to have and cultivate a certain relation to one's aloneness' (2019, 32). To avoid writing another essay on Mitski, I buy a postcard print on Redbubble that says NOBODY NOBODY NOBODY NOBODY in magenta bubble letters. I blue-tack it to my wall, above eyeline. I treat myself to hours of silence and not-writing, in which the silence is just data collection on white noise and suburban rumble. Lying on the floor (again), I ruminate over the specific sharpness of cold tiles through my shirt; the echo of tires on asphalt outside; the wilting flowers from my twenty-second birthday, which did not feel very *22* by Taylor Swift. I say: sharpness punctures, puckers. At night is when. In the distance, I hear. The silent gasp of leaving every sentence unfinished is a blade of precision in the form of a blinking cursor. A wave folding inwards consumes itself [I cannibalise my own hunger]. In other words, I want and delete and want and delete and want and delete and—

iii.

While reading *Essays in Love* (de Botton 2006) and *The Lonely City* (Laing 2016), I come across two sentences that I obsess over later:

1. 'Perhaps it is true that we do not really exist until there is someone there to see us existing.'

2. 'My life felt empty and unreal and I was embarrassed about its thinness.'[1]

I text the first quote to the group chat ('what do u guys think abt this') and transcribe the second in my journal, where the loopy scrawl of my handwriting makes it belong to me. I circle the word thinness twice, picturing my life as something flat and flimsy, malleable enough to press into shape.

iv.

The automatic looping of GIFs is layered with meaning in its seamless and perfect viewing in which the beginning and end are almost indistinguishable (Miltner and Highfield 2017, 6).

v.

For the past three years my desktop background has been the same image of *Garden Rose* (1982) by Mark Adams, pixelated and stretched across a refurbished 11" screen. It is a watercolour painting of a pale rose blooming, but the mesmerising part, the thing that draws you in, is the

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[1] The quoted passages are left purposely ambiguous for the reader to consider how the two phrases could apply to either book.

spread of emptiness in the shadow of the glass where the sunlight's refraction bleeds through water. I have never seen anything so beautiful in real life (pockets of translucence, flower petals the colour of tofu) because only I know this image as home base. When I see *Garden Rose* in a viral post of Mark Adams' paintings on *Twitter*, it is strangely unfamiliar, though only slightly smaller, pictured in a high definition that hurts to look at.

vi.

In the final line of her poem *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* Sally Wen Mao asks me, very loudly:

> 'The sun doesn't need more heat,

so why should you? The trees don't need

> to be close, so why should you?'

I reread this poem over many years: after the first ache of healing fizzles into memory, after loss, through a slow-burn season of guilt. Alone again but in a new way, I travel nowhere. I think of birds heading north—drawn to the sun, or home, or movement. Never quite knowing which, but going anyway.

vii.

all softness
is defined
by the presence of touch

———————————

our relational bodies tell us
how we are supposed to feel
and i always feel it
until i don't

viii.

see: attached   see: alternative ending   see: message delivered with warm regards, best regards, the kindest, most loved.   i repeat to myself: i am beloved   i am a palimpsest   of temporal aches   archival prints   layered over   transient feelings   spilling over, fossilised or hyperlinked   into a new dimension   i am   repetition enacting a self into being i am waiting to be held   to be smiled at   to rewrite what we think of as skin, to glisten and unfold   submerged in   an endless stream   lie down to breathe   enter or return

[they say the language of the digital falls flat in the absence of what is 'real' but my face framed by the light of a screen is your face framed by this window is our elegiac failures of touch is our insufficient intimacy is oversaturation is chlorine blue fluorescent plastic, eyes straining out-of-sync, somersaulting heart]

ix.

in the dream, i am a cyborg. like a temptress in a Western sci-fi, made of rusted metal & almost-flesh. tbh i don't like watching movies that much—in real life i'm never allowed to be someone i'm not & i'm so much of myself it makes me sick. but dream-me is pure holographic in her technicolour splendour: 90s jelly shoes & cheap organza & the winter sun passing through her skin like layers of cellophane. i want to cross all the years this light has travelled to touch the shape of myself in her body. her body, which is my body. this city of bodies, where i am the only spectator, always describing my images tenderly to no one.

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Biography

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'Transient Feelings': Creative Response

MORVEN GOW, *University of Stirling*

A painful story of dislocation, of isolation, and of alienation in a landscape lacking in physicality. Yet these creative autoethnographic vignettes which describe this state of limbo with great feeling and imagery, inspire in the reader vivid dreamlike memories of past physical experiences.

Are such vivid memories which prompt muscle memory, inspired by the vignettes, less affective and meaningful than tangible experience?

The vignettes provoke questions around the tension between the potential freedom of digital 'limitlessness' and physical bounds of place; physical isolation from other bodies yet the opportunity to connect with any number of people across the globe digitally; and the screen as mediator, gatekeeper of emotions, in the digital landscape.

The vignettes fully describe the loneliness at the heart of a web of spun threads, seeking others to create a connective tissue of threads to build community in a human response to lockdown isolation.

Despite the traditional themes associated with digital life, there is hope and emotion, love and connection.

i.

Numbers deceive

Trick the heart into believing order of time and structure

Lead you by the hand? Not here

Numbers do not exist

Time does not exist

Create your own world

Start anywhere

i. can be i., ii., iii., iv., v., vi., vii., viii., or ix.

Travel freely with no borders

in infinite space and time

bask in an endless ocean

ii.

'Lying on the floor (again)' or as you float on the surface of an endless ocean, the temperature and hardness of the tiles provoke physical sensations in the writer while inspiring in me a muscle memory and echo of feelings of sensory deprivation. I feel the memory. In a floatation tank, water hard under me as granite. I flick a little finger when the water has turned to solid stone, my back responding to it, hard and sore in response. At my finger flick, all physical feeling rushes back into my body. All nerves, heart, and soul are one body again, held softly, caressed in supportive water.

Time passes slow in the tank. Your flowers sag and wilt. Time did not mark your 22nd birthday. Clock hands turn, digital clocks blink but do not mark events which celebrate us, our humanity, the way we expect and desire. The 'blinking' eye of the cursor's gaze? You stare at it. It stares at you.

The cursor, stopping at each 'sentence unfinished', cutting the flow of your words, is 'a blade of precision' leaving invisible and unsaved marks on your screen where you and time stopped. Loneliness is a hunger, the 'wave folding inwards' is sensuous imagery of a devouring which repeats to infinity. The imagery elicits a response in me. I see the eagle swooping down to devour the liver of Prometheus as he is bound to a rock, forever. Every day, the liver created anew. Our loneliness is faced every day, anew, as we experience a hollowing out like the wave 'folding inwards.'

iii.

The quotes expose thoughts and actions in a digital performative landscape contrasted with perceived real life. One quote is shared to a group chat, seeking confirmation and affirmation of existence.

I share therefore I am?

In contrast, the other quote is recorded privately, in handwriting, to own the statement marking it as personal. The thoughts and fears we bury in journals contrast with the lives we are seen to live online.

iv.

GIFs devour themselves

An infinity of beginnings

Fresh at first play

And endings which never find closure

We engage and dis-engage

Interest lost

Scrolling on and on and on

v.

The singularity of the Garden Rose image 'pixelated and stretched' recalls insect collections with movement pinned, time halted, decay banished, all under glass screens. The rose image, although replicated countless times on other devices and platforms contains an authenticity on the 'refurbished 11" screen', a singular biography and image on the writer's screen. Is it that the HD image is too real for our eyes to bear?

vi.

Do we all travel nowhere? We travel through the night in dreamscapes, in our thoughts of people and places during the day. We travel backwards and forwards in time to escape the devouring present loneliness and longing, exchanging images and memories online to remind ourselves that other places and people still exist in the physical world. Is this imaginary travel less real for being intangible? We hold shells and stones from beaches, fir cones from forest walks, books gifted by friends, all to bring tangible experience to our memories of people, places and times.

vii.

We float

Individually

Alone

Apart

Still

The cradle of water transforms under and around us

Hardening

Unyielding

To recall the softness of the water

Move

Stretch

Imagine

viii.

'My face framed by the light of the screen is your face framed by this window' shines with humanity. Our capacity for love and building connections will triumph, perhaps. Love continues to be felt in our 'somersaulting heart'. Despite the mediation of screen (simply a window to other worlds) and 'insufficient intimacy', painfully acknowledged, we still fall in love.

ix.

In the digital landscape of pure imagination, we can be anyone we choose. In so-called real life, are we not allowed to choose? Is it only in the digital landscape that we can start fresh every day, reinventing or perhaps devouring ourselves anew? We hear and read "New year, new you", "Every day is a new beginning". Is this only for digital lives?

The awful loneliness experienced painfully with 'describing my images tenderly to no-one' ends one vignette*.

Yet the digital realm is soul full, filled with eyes and ears eager to devour afresh images every minute of every day.

*It may not be the final vignette for every reader.

Biography

Morven Gow is a writer and a doctoral researcher at the University of Stirling, researching authenticity in 21st Century book publishing cultures. She has read her poems on *BBC Radio Scotland* and in online poetry events. She spent 30 years in the advertising industry planning and buying campaigns for cultural organisations and media companies.

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Deep Mediatization during COVID-19: An Interview with Professor Andreas Hepp, University of Bremen

SANTHOSH KUMAR PUTTA, *Osmania University*

BISSIE ANDERSON, *University of Stirling*

Co-Editors

[SKP and BA] Professor Hepp, your seminal theoretical work (individual and in collaboration with Nick Couldry) on mediatization has sought to understand the increasingly mediated construction of reality in today's digitized world. Your book *Deep Mediatization* (Routledge, 2020) argues that mediatization has reached an advanced stage in which all elements in our social world are deeply related to the media and other technological infrastructures. Has this process accelerated and deepened further with the COVID-19 pandemic?

[AH] Certainly, it has – in a sense, we can say that we have experienced the pandemic as deeply mediatized. At least four points can be identified here. First, from the initial outbreak, we have experienced the pandemic on the basis of expectations having been mediated. Films and series featuring dangerous viruses, their rapid spread and humanity's struggle with them have been popular since at least the 1970s. And for those who did not already know them, they were readily available through the various digital platforms after Covid-19 broke out. With this in mind, we approached the pandemic from existing media-mediated scripts on what 'can happen' and 'how to deal with it'. Second, we have a mediated experience of the pandemic itself: what we know about the pandemic has been communicated to us through the media, and here partially automated data journalism – the continuous visual processing of the latest Corona figures (infections, deaths, vaccinations) – has, at times, played a significant role. Third, we are dealing with an ongoing media-mediated analysis of the course the pandemic takes. What is meant here is that digital media and their infrastructures in particular are being used to obtain 'data' on the ways in which people are dealing with the pandemic. Examples of this include the analysis of people's mobility during the lockdown using login data from their mobile phones or a range of mathematical models of possible pandemic outcomes using various other digital data. Fourth and finally, we were repeatedly confronted with the idea of a media-based 'solution' to individual problems brought up by the pandemic. Digital media in particular should be mentioned here, for example, when at the beginning of the pandemic politicians imagined a Covid app as the central solution strategy, digital platforms were seen as the solution to prevent a collapse of the local economy and cultural industries, or when working from home was only possible through specific platforms and video conferencing systems. In all these cases, significant facets of the 'solutions' were bought from Silicon Valley and made these companies money as individuals became poorer as a result of the pandemic. Inequalities of the emerging digital society were probably made clear to all by the pandemic and in all likelihood were further exacerbated.

[SKP and BA] To what extent does the concept *deep mediatization* relate to technological determinism? Is *deep mediatization* a phenomenon that solely results from advancements in information and communication technologies, or is it determined by other factors too?

[AH] The mediatization approach has nothing to do with technological determinism, on the contrary: it always assumes that media technologies, like all technologies, are to be understood as part of culture and society. That is why it is argued that the focus should be on the interrelationship between media and communication on the one hand and culture and society on the other – or formulated differently: There is a need to focus on how we produce certain forms of culture and society by means of certain media technologies, which always remain part of culture and society. Here the position is very clear, it is not about 'effect' but about complex interrelations and dynamics. That said, we should keep in mind that certain forms of culture and society are inconceivable without certain media technologies. And that is precisely why it remains relevant to ask how cultures and societies change *with* media, which is different from asking what the effects of media technologies are.

[SKP and BA] In your book you write about the role of supra-individual actors in the creation of *deep mediatization*. Who are these key actors and what responsibility do they bear for constructing our mediated reality?

[AH] When we look at the process of deep mediatization, there are two supra-individual actors in particular who are always in the foreground: Private companies and state agencies. These are certainly important drivers of deep mediatization. This process is human-made and, therefore, economic and political interests play a large role. One can call these kinds of supra-individual actors 'corporate actors'. But there are also 'collective actors' who play an important role in the 'making' of deep mediatization. Mostly, the focus here has been on social movements, for example, the open-source movement and its notion of a society shaped by technology. My argument is that we should have in addition another collective actor in mind, namely pioneer communities. Examples of this are the Whole Earth Network in the San Francisco Bay Area studied by Fred Turner or the Quantified Self and Maker movements. These are a kind of hybrid between social movements and think tanks, have certain ideas of a future shaped by digital media, and are characterized by experimental practices to these ends. Only in rare cases does society change directly in the way the members of pioneer communities imagine it. But through their experimental practices and imaginations, they lay the ground for possible change. That is why they should be kept in mind.

[SKP and BA] Societies have been mediatized for a long time, now even more so with the use of algorithms and artificial intelligence. Do you think the acceleration of the process of mediatization we have experienced in the pandemic will eventually lead to something akin to *hypermediatization*? Will we see that happen in the future and, if so, what manifestations do you expect *hypermediatization* to take?

[AH] I wouldn't introduce another term here, but you certainly can. But what seems important to me in this context is an underlying argument: because media have become digital, we now, in relation to media, have tighter loops of recursivity than we had in in the not-too-distant past. We continuously leave digital traces on platforms through our practices, and these traces are in turn reflected back to us, not only on an individual level, but also on a collective level: as topics that 'trend', as 'recommendations' that follow from previous purchases, as 'collectivities' that form around platforms, and so on. Such processes happen almost in real time and are also the basis for the ongoing technological development of digital platforms. These tight loops of recursivity did not exist in this form before digital media and their infrastructures.

[SKP and BA] Addressing the challenges presented by *deep mediatization* to mediatization research, you argue that the latter must incorporate the analysis of algorithms, data, and digital infrastructures. Should corporate practices of developing and encouraging certain consumer behavior and user/audience engagement be part of this conceptualization?

[AH] Certainly, it is important to have a broad view and my references are not to be understood as being entirely complete. I wanted to point out one thing in particular: If communication and media research wants to take deep mediatization seriously, its former conceptual tools are not sufficient, nor are its methods. It must look for connections, for example, with critical data studies or computational social sciences, but without giving up its own focus. I am very reassured that this broadening of this perspective has increased in the last few years and that, for example, questions of technologies and algorithms have been given the space they should have.

[SKP and BA] Most of the social networking sites are free to use and owned by some the richest corporations in the world. Users of these platforms rarely give much thought to why these platforms are free and how corporations profit from them. Can the theory of *deep mediatization* be used to explain how consumers are fed certain information and conditioned for these tech giants' profit, while consumers perform what Christian Fuchs refers to as "digital labour"?

[AH] Yes, it certainly can. A key argument is to bring the basic ideas of Norbert Elias' process sociology into research on media and communication, and here it is the argument to understand media not as something static, but as an ongoing process of the institutionalization and the materialization of human practice. In this way, one can, and should, also ask the question: What forms of value creation are institutionalized? And how are these inscribed in the material structures of platforms?

[SKP and BA] You argue that there is an entanglement of general social practices with media and that the lines between communicative action and physical action are blurring. With the advancements and increased use of automated technologies, how important is media literacy? Do you think *deep mediatization* is something that is controllable? If so, how?

[AH] Especially with deep mediatization, questions of media literacy become even more important than before. Above all, in my view, they no longer appear as something separate. In the age of legacy media – i.e. the classical mass media – media literacy was understood as the ability to critically comprehend media discourses and, in the best case, to participate in them. Nowadays, questions of media literacy permeate the entirety of everyday practice: How do I communicate with my friends through which medium? How do I handle my own data? Who do I allow access to, who not? What problematic dynamics can develop in online discourses? That said, deep mediatization is a term used to describe an overarching process of change, just like individualization or globalization. As such, it is not easily controllable by a single person. However, because it is made by us humans, we can always ask ourselves the question: Who is being excluded? Where does deep mediatization contribute to a 'good life' and where does it not? Asking such questions is not simply about individual media literacy, but fundamentally about organizing platforms and digital infrastructures.

[SKP and BA] *Deep mediatization* **employs a functionalist approach to understanding the social construction of reality. By doing so, is it undermining individual subjectivity? Can the pervasive persuasive capabilities of new media be resisted to achieve individual autonomy? And what are the effects of a deeply mediatized world on the psychology and well-being of the individual?**

[AH] From my point of view, an important basis for understanding deep mediatization is the aforementioned process sociology. This does not juxtapose the individual and society, but understands society as always emerging through individual practice and that individuals are always part of society. Norbert Elias coined the term 'figuration' to capture this. A community, for example, is a figuration of people who share certain practices and orientations of meaning. One can now look at this figuration from two perspectives: From the perspective of the figuration as a whole or from the perspective of the individual as part of that figuration. This is particularly helpful for questions of autonomy. Autonomy is never absolute, but relational: it always arises in certain figurations. And then the decisive question in relation to digital media and infrastructures is: What spaces for practice do they promote for people in certain figurations? Where do they replicate previous restrictions? Where do they create new ones? From my point of view, it is this kind of relational thinking that helps.

[SKP and BA] In your eponymous book, you argue that, considering *deep mediatization* **the new normal, digital media and their infrastructures should be structured in such a way so as to enable "the good life". How can this be best achieved? What conditions need to be in place and whose responsibility is it to drive a more human-centred and ethical media ecosystem?**

[AH] I have already hinted at this somewhat: I think it is important to look at the institutionalization and materialization of digital media as they currently exist and to ask ourselves the question: Are these what we really want? Digital platforms, for example, are currently almost all in the hands of private companies that use them to create value. If platforms have become so important for today's communication that we see them as infrastructure,

shouldn't we organize the availability of them differently than we have done so far? For my part, it is important to first ask how we envision our media infrastructure in and across individual societies and then develop organizational models that correspond to these values. This is a multi-layered political process, but I think it is worth going through.

[SKP and BA] At the ICA 2020 conference, which took place virtually for the first time due to the global pandemic, you and Wiebke Loosen argued that COVID-19 could be theorized as a "mediatized collective break" during which we are experiencing the "refiguration of public connection". Thinking of contingency relations, in terms of what has been, what we are going through and what will come after the pandemic, what transformations in public communications do you expect COVID-19 will lead to?

[AH] It is always difficult to predict the future, so I am cautions about this. Maybe it helps to explain a little what Wiebke Loosen and I meant by that: First of all, the pandemic was a break with previous patterns of media production, while at the same time the entire public discourse in many countries was suddenly focused on only one topic. In addition, digital forms of dissemination gained importance at all levels from one day to another. These kind of breaks in established patterns of production do two things: on the one hand, they are like a lens through which pre-existing problems become more visible. And in the case of digital media, these concerns include questions of inequality, questions of the quality of public discourse, and so on. Here, the pandemic has made certain problems very apparent to us. On the other hand, such a break always opens up possibilities for change. Some changes will simply be that people are more used to doing certain things through digital media than before. In this respect, the pandemic can further advance the process of deep mediatization. But at the same time, it has also shown that there are limits to digital mediation. And here we will be confronted with new processes of societal negotiation. What do we want to have mediated digitally? And what do we want to experience directly?

[SKP and BA] Finally, how does this *Networking Knowledge* special issue contribute to the debates on mediatization and the mediated construction of reality – both at a time of COVID-19 pandemic and more broadly?

[AH] I think the thematic issue is a very important contribution to furthering the discussion on deep mediatization. From my point of view, the various articles show very well what I said at the beginning of the interview, namely that we experienced the pandemic as deeply mediatized. This applies to the coverage of the pandemic, as Zheng Yang's contribution shows with the example of war metaphors in Chinese reporting; it applies to the intimate space of politicians, which Sara García Santamaría analyses; it is shown, as Jeannine Teichert explains, by the experience of close friendships or that of presence, as Anastasiya Maksymchuk and Katherina Radeva deal with it. I also found remarkable the negotiation of friendships and the closeness and distance in them, analyzed by Lauren Dempsey, and the Zen assembly as it took place online and is reflected by Lisette Torres. Merlin Seller looks at the role of digital games in lock-down situations and Donnalyn Xu or Morven Gow at the experience of navigating loneliness and intimacy in the digital space. All of us probably know something similar from our own experience of the

pandemic. I think the important contribution the issue has to offer is to have made this all accessible for analytical reflection.

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