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DIGITAL ISOLATION AND ECOLOGICAL ABSTRACTION Interconnecting with the Environment during Pandemic Times

Abstract

For environmental activists and ecological pressure groups, Covid-19 gives an opportunity to readdress the urgencies of climate change as well as humanity's exploitative habits, including extended travelling, meat consumption and the exploitation of wild life. In this article, we employ multi-sited online ethnography to analyze three frames of environmental communication that emerged during the early stages of the pandemic: 'humans are the biggest virus', 'against animal exploitation' and 'changing our lifestyle'. We bring attention to how these anti-anthropocentric frames suggest interconnecting with nature and the planet through the digital apparatus of communication, which captures critique in instantaneous recursive loops. We suggest that the paradigm of 'ecological abstraction', magnified through the pandemic crisis, can be seen as an exemplary present and futurist assemblage through which environmental concerns are addressed.

Keywords

Covid-19; abstraction; ecology; isolation; smart working; digital platforms; netnography.

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1. INTRODUCTION

After its wide circulation in the virtual world and Internet studies in the past decades, 'virality' with Covid-19 enters forcefully the physical world, causing a dramatic rearrangement of everyday practices and the lived experience of contemporary times. The pandemic crisis has locked down or seriously disrupted physical movement in most of Europe and the world, from early 2020 until the time of writing, as online communication became more than ever our "umbilical to the outside world"¹. Given the fact that the virus affected the domain of biological materiality, the metaphor of the 'umbilical' in reference to social media engagement is telling: online communication functions as a biological prosthesis invisibly attached to human bodies. The virus brings to the debate something that was already present in the elaboration of the idea of media ecology, descending from someone like Marshall McLuhan: media are not just means and extensions of our body, they are environments in which we

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¹ W. Douglas Heaven, "Why the Coronavirus Lockdown Is Making the Internet Stronger than Ever", *MIT Review*, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/04/07/998552/why-the-coronavirus-lockdown-is-making-the-internet-better-than-ever/>. Accessed June 10, 2020.

live. Thinking of McLuhan as the first cyberpunk writer², we can consider cyberpunk and the posthuman condition as bound to the ecological dimension, rather than just metaphors of technological mutation. In this regard, the contrast between human vulnerability and transhuman artificiality highlights the simultaneity of two trajectories that mingle, overlap and conflict during the pandemic crisis. On the one hand, we see the rise of narratives around human *embodiment* – expressed in biological materiality, fragility, empathy and care – and on the other hand, of proliferating practices around inhuman *abstraction* – expressed in algorithms, information, computation, networks and data through which the world increasingly ‘experiences’ this materiality. Or, put another way, on the one hand, the pandemic offered a reappraisal of what Tithi Bhattacharya refers to as “life-making activities”³, expressed in the iconic figure of the ‘nurse’, which are traditionally gendered and associated with the domestic sphere, and on the other hand, a rapid disassociation from physicality through an increasing reliance on platforms and digital communication. Constitutive in many ways of modernity itself, the tension between embodiment and abstraction undergoes an unprecedented acceleration with Covid-19.

This paper grapples with the ways the tension between embodiment and abstraction, the human and the inhuman, plays out in the realm of environmental communication during the pandemic crisis. For environmental activists and ecological pressure groups, the disaster of Covid-19 poses an opportunity to readdress the urgencies of climate change as well as humanity’s exploitative habits, including extended travelling, meat consumption and the exploitation of wild life. Privileging the idea of ‘interconnection’, ecological communication, ranging from issues surrounding climate change to animal rights and fuel consumption, is generally predicated upon its capacity to enable ‘affect’ to the receiver, in which empathy with the nonhuman is key⁴. To empathize with the cause of the climate change or ecology in general, the receiver needs to be ‘moved’ by an encounter. For instance, in ecological literature highlighting the idea of embodied cognition, learning often comes as an effect of encountering counter narratives, information and other “rhetorical strategies”⁵. Yet, taking place in conditions of social isolation, the ecological communicative apparatus necessarily amplifies what we can call ‘ecological abstraction’ since digital isolation minimizes the affective bonds with the outside world. We suggest that the paradigm of ecological abstraction, magnified through the pandemic crisis, can be seen as an exemplary present and futurist assemblage through which environmental concerns are addressed. If environmental consciousness privileges the idea of ‘interconnection’ between human and nature, how does social isolation, which necessarily privileges distance, affect this interconnection? How is the cognitive event of ‘knowing’ that the environment needs to be cared for is crafted in the disorienting and highly distractive online space?⁶ What

² W. Chun, H. Kyong, “Marshall McLuhan: The First Cyberpunk Author?”, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13, 1 (2014): 36-38.

³ S. Jane, “Social Reproduction and the Pandemic, with Tithi Bhattacharya”, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/social-reproduction-and-the-pandemic-with-tithi-bhattacharya. Accessed June 10, 2020.

⁴ For instance A.W. Von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*, Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 2017 and P. Anat, *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

⁵ Von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies*, 3-4.

⁶ J. Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010 and E. Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not To Liberate the World*, London: Penguin, 2011 and M. Andrejevic, *Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know*, New York: Routledge, 2013.

does it mean to raise awareness on the environment in an increasingly virtual world? This paper aims to open and speculate on these questions as the Covid-19 reality makes them even more pertinent. After explaining the research methods in the first section, we describe the overall premise of automation and following we discuss how the virus impacts and amplifies its dynamics. Subsequently, we explore the frames of environmental communication during Covid-19 and in the last section we point out that isolation magnifies ecological abstraction in which the environment is perceived as data on computer screens.

2. METHODOLOGY

We use multi-sited digital ethnography⁷ to examine the storytelling of the catastrophe by environmental actors and activist groups amidst an imperative for leading more secluded identities, practices and lifestyles as suggested in the first wave of Covid-19 in Europe. We position these narratives in the context of the online “in-go-glut”, which refers to the information overload and immediate questioning of all positions, that tends to paralyze the public’s capacity to form concrete opinions about things⁸. In particular, we followed the websites, Facebook and Instagram accounts of international environmental activist groups, such as *Extinction Rebellion* (EX), *Direct Action Everywhere* (DxE) and *Fridays for Future International* (FFF), in the period between March 1 until April 30, 2020. Using the keywords “Covid” and “pandemic”, we collected publicly available data from their posts, talks and events and tracked their reception in the comments section. In the same period, we have been following the hashtag #climatechange in Twitter, which was used by many Covid-related posts every day. By following this hashtag, we were able to track how climate change was articulated in Twitter in respect to Covid-19 as the pandemic was taking place. In turn, from observing traffic around these Twitter posts we were led to other Twitter posts referring to same issue yet without using these particular hashtags, making thus use of the iterability and methodological openness that ethnography offers⁹. Out of all Twitter posts we encountered, we chose the ones that became ‘viral’ and initiated public debate often exceeding the Twitter sphere. We analyzed around 50 posts and coded them manually. In doing that, we used the perspective of framing to account for the dominant ways that the Covid-19 was communicated by environmental actors¹⁰. By coding the material, we focused on three main frames (more on them later) through which the Covid-19 crisis has been conceptualized by these actors as an opportunity for interconnecting and thinking through the human as part of a whole. These frames were not inherent to the material in some organic way but emerged from the latter’s critical analysis. Although they share the same ideological principle, that is to prioritize environmental interconnection, as we shall see later, they were often in antagonistic relation to each other. Frames select, define, prioritize, identity, diagnose and suggest solutions to problems. To frame then, according to Murray Edelman, is

⁷ G.E. Marcus, “Ethnography In/Of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (1995), 1: 95-117 and R.V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2010.

⁸ Andrejevic, *Infoglut: How Too Much Information is Changing the Way We Think and Know*.

⁹ K. O’Reilly, *Key Concepts in Ethnography*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008.

¹⁰ P. Zhongdang, G.M. Kosicki, “Framing Analysis: An Approach to News Discourse”, *Political Communication*, 10, 1 (1993): 55-75.

“to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described”¹¹. Following literature on framing theory, we read the semiotic devices these actors employed in their posts, such as examples, images, metaphors and binary oppositions, as suggestive of “a framework within which to view the issue”¹².

The frames we identified are the ‘humans are the biggest virus’, the ‘against animal exploitation’ and the ‘changing our lifestyle’. These frames “define problems”, “diagnose causes” “make moral judgments” and “suggest remedies”¹³. In turn, the actors enacting these frames draw on particular types of reasoning, or what Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot on regimes of justification for legitimizing their claims: the emotional, the militant and the scientific. Although we do not follow their exact categories, we employ the work of Boltanski and Thévenot on justification theory¹⁴, which holds that actors or the protagonists of an argument need always to mobilize their “sense of justice”, which in turn is grounded on different kinds of logics¹⁵. Through these regimes of justification an argument in a debate purports to gain leverage or moral advantage. For instance, an actor speaking from within the emotional regime of justification would defend their narratives by using ‘moving’ words (such as ‘disturbing’, ‘catastrophe’ or ‘urgent’), while someone speaking from within the scientific regime will claim objectivity through more neutral phrases pointing to published research. In reality, in the material we analyzed, more than one regime is always present in each frame. The frames are not treated as necessarily emergent from the tension between digital isolation and environmental abstraction that the pandemic highlighted; they are simply intensifications of frames already existing in prior activist discourses varyingly expressed in environmental groups and popular culture. By foregrounding these frames, we aim to show how environmental problems and activist causes are subsumed to the online cacophony of the “ambivalent Internet”¹⁶ at a time when digital isolation not only accelerates abstraction from the natural world but becomes a major cause of stress and confusion which should be critically examined.

Finally, the broad conception of environmental actors necessarily enlarges the scope of the paper. Rather than looking at merely how one group enables argumentation during the Covid-19, we aim to present the more general frames through which ‘interconnection in isolation’ is publicly articulated. In turn, all the frames we present are disputed by climate change denialists and caught up in the information loop of an “economic-ideological form wherein reflexivity captures creativity and resistance” – what Jodi Dean calls “communicative capitalism”¹⁷.

¹¹ M. Edelman, “Contestable Categories and Public Opinion”, *Political Communication*, 10, 3 (1993): 231-242.

¹² O. Baysha, K. Hallahan, “Media Framing of the Ukrainian Political Crisis, 2000-2001”, *Journalism Studies*, 5, 2 (2004): 233-246 (235).

¹³ Edelman, “Contestable Categories and Public Opinion”, 52.

¹⁴ L. Boltanski, L. Thévenot. *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, Princeton: University Press, 2006.

¹⁵ I.F. Silber, “Emotions as Regime of Justification? The Case of Civic Anger”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 14, 3 (2011): 301-320 and D. Dequech, “Logics of Justification and Logics of Action”, *Journal of Economic Issues*, 42, 2 (2008): 527-535 (528).

¹⁶ P. Whitney, R.M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018.

¹⁷ J. Dean, “Not Him, Us (and We Aren’t Populists)”, *Theory & Event*, 20, 1 (2017): 38-44.

3. ABSTRACTION AND AUTOMATION

In his book *Automatic Society*, Bernard Stiegler discusses the passage from an industrial and entropic society, in which the thermodynamic machine dominated, to an automatic society in which Big Data and algorithms penetrate every area of daily life, constituting “the infrastructure of an automatic society to come”¹⁸. The watershed moment of this transition is the 1990s, in which the creation of the World Wide Web lays the foundation a “purely computational” capitalism, which is crystalized in the “data economy”¹⁹. For Stiegler, industrial capitalism is “an era in which calculation prevails over every other criteria of decision-making” and where “algorithmic and mechanical becoming is concretized and materialized as logical automation [...]”²⁰. Not only society is remotely controlled but the ‘remote’ becomes a regulatory ideal of social relationships, such as in the constitution of subjects through knowledge. The citizen-user encounters, intentionally or not, the paradigm of computational cognitivism that emerges as the dominant form of learning and experiencing the world as type of governance based on cybernetics, or what Karen Yeung following Evgeniy Morozov calls “algorithmic regulation”²¹. The paradigm of computation, which finds its apotheosis in algorithms, expresses the accelerated disembodiment characterizing reflexive modernity in which all social forms are in a perpetual self-questioning²².

In automatic society, the shift to disembodiment and the reliance on abstract systems is accelerated, virtually affecting all areas of social life. In the domain of physical labour, for instance, in a transition already characteristic of the post-industrial societies, there is a process of growing expropriation of intellectual and creative skills replacing the merely physical²³. If the spatial archetype of labour in industrial society is the factory, where the worker is secluded yet able to socialize and possibly unionize, the equivalent in automatic society is the computer screen condensing all aspects of communication and relations in the virtual space with little possibility for social interaction or unionizing.

The increasing reliance on automation in the domain of labour enables dislocations and relocations in the larger domain of the social and the subjective. The computational relation is nicely captured in what Andreas Wittel calls the rise of “network sociality”, which he understands in contrast to “community”²⁴. For Wittel, if community implies stability, permanence, affective bonds and a “common history or narrative of the collective”, in turn network sociality is defined by ephemerality, flexibility and loose connections. No doubt, one can argue that there are still narratives that address collectives today. There is no better example than the Anthropocene, which indeed poses humanity as a collective subject with a shared history, whose activity impacts other objects or assemblages of objects, such as the ‘planet’, the ‘animals’ or the ‘Gaia’²⁵. Yet, the col-

¹⁸ B. Stiegler, *Automatic Society: The Future of Work*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018, 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

²¹ K. Yeung, “Algorithmic Regulation: A Critical Interrogation”, *Regulation & Governance*, 12, 4 (2018): 505-523.

²² U. Beck, S. Lash, B. Wynne, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1992.

²³ N. Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex*, London: Pluto Press, 2015.

²⁴ A. Wittel, “Toward a Network Sociality”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18, 6 (2001): 51-76 (51).

²⁵ B. Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

lective subject in network sociality is more abstract and internally fractured as its status depends on loops of information rather than “mutual experience”²⁶. For most Internet users of the Global North receiving online information about the climate change, for instance, climate change is something not immediately testified by sensual experience; it has to be validated by the authority of the scientist, which, especially in the context of post-truth societies, is continuously challenged by other scientists, paid trolls, industry representatives and so on.

As a master narrative of climate change is absent or continuously challenged in Internet’s reflexive loops, what is left is an endless recycling of information and counter information, characteristic of what Jodi Dean calls “communicative capitalism”²⁷. Following Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, Dean argues that in communicative capitalism there is a decline in calls “symbolic efficacy”, that is of a master narrative through which meaning can be stabilized, resulting in the “fundamental uncertainty accompanying the impossibility of [...] fully anchoring or pinning down meanings”²⁸. In turn, uncertainty nurtures a “whatever being”, moulded through recursive information loops in which meaning is continuously recycled questioning previous ‘truths’ and opening them up to other truths²⁹. In communicative capitalism, as we shall see, the response time of narratives and counter narratives is immediate and therefore the recipient fails to exercise meaningful critical thinking, which requires time to process and reflect on an idea³⁰.

4. VIRUS AND ISOLATION

Covid-19 reframes the daily life in an unrecognizable way. The virus reprograms the spatial relationships between humans and reshuffles the geometries through which society organizes itself. This ability of the virus to shape and reshape society brings it closer to what McLuhan considered to be a “pure medium”³¹ in the case of the of electric bulb: a medium without message. Likewise, the virus does not have any meaningful ‘content’ for itself but the capacity to stage a radical repurposing of its surroundings. Particularly, Covid-19 exacerbates the dynamics of automatic society and communicative capitalism through the figure of ‘isolation’. Digital isolation occurs out of the necessity of maintaining bonds at a distance, whether these are friendly, professional and other relations, as physicality gives way to the imperative of virtual communication. Isolation plus digital technologies becomes the semiotic and material assemblage referring to an increasing employment of an array of techniques of distancing, including virtual teaching, virtual shopping, virtual socializing and virtual concert and museum-going, not to mention distance surveillance techniques, including the extended use of face recognition and phone surveillance in many parts of the world, including Europe. The virus transforms homes into hyper-connected cells, with Internet TV and food delivery systems as urban spaces and shopping centres are deserted and replaced with AI systems, virtualization and e-commerce³².

These isolation techniques may stay in the post-Coronavirus contexts at varying

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ J. Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁰ For immediate or real-time responsiveness and “datafication” see A. Powel, *The Mediations of Data*, in J. Curran, D. Hesmondhlagh, *Media and Society*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 101-138.

³¹ M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994.

³² N. Barile, *Ontobranding as a Destiny for Fashion: Social Polarization, Grassroots Creativity and the*

velocities and degrees. Speculating on that, we can mention for instance how the rapid rise of discussions on technologies of ‘contact tracing’ during the pandemic, brought into public debate the idea that in order to make these technologies effective in battling the virus, the citizens need to sacrifice parts of their privacy since it is impossible to have both effective combating and privacy at the same time³³. Or, in the field of higher education, the paradigm of distance learning is expected to become an increasingly pervasive reality of neoliberal academia in order to reduce teaching costs. The same goes with museums and exhibition spaces where ‘virtuality’ is a more cost-effective way to deliver projects. Or, to bring another example, the consumption lifestyle, which for the common citizen is a ‘natural’ fact, reveals its artificiality; in a society of seclusion fashion has almost no reason to be, if not for private and domestic pleasure. To be clear, it does not follow from the above that there will be some ‘total’ substitution of the physical from the virtual. Rather, we argue that with Covid-19 the hyper-accelerated pervasion of ‘remoteness’ in social, cultural and economic life is one way or another here to stay.

The paradigm of remoteness also speaks to a growing dissatisfaction with travelling, tourism and increased mobility, practices based on the fossil fuel economy and mostly associated with the privileged Global North. Through this lens, ‘isolation’ as the imperative to ‘stay local’ can be claimed as something potentially positive for nature regeneration. In the above aspect, the shift to remoteness and distance serves the double role of both regulating capitalism from distance as well as toning down the effects of climate change. Yet from the perspective of environmental communication, it rewrites the common pleads for interconnectedness with nature as it accelerates abstract perception *vis-à-vis* natural phenomena. As a case in point, the Earth Day this year was celebrated ‘remotely’ and exclusively online on April 22. What does it mean to perceive interconnectedness in isolation and relate with the earth through a computer screen?

5. FRAMES OF ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION DURING COVID-19

During our research, we selected three main frames of environmental communication during Covid-19 through which activists and ecological organizations called for larger ecological awareness to the climate crisis. These frames include, the ‘humans are the biggest virus’, the ‘against animal exploitation’ and the ‘changing our lifestyle’. The main conceptual linkage of these frames is grounded on anti-anthropocentrism, namely that human beings should not be seen as the center of the universe, and expressed in the idea of ‘interconnection’, namely that human beings must see themselves as part of the larger environment rather than as autonomous organisms. The call for greater ‘interconnection’ also appeared in digital publications of more institutionalized media and platforms (e.g. World Economic Forum, Columbia’s University Earth Institute and Slate Magazine, among others)³⁴. The actors of these frames (and of interconnection

Automation of Everything, in A. Rafele, F. Adalma, eds., 2020, *Cultural Studies in a Digital Age*, San Diego: San Diego University Press, 2020.

³³ D. Marr, “Why Contact Tracing Apps Will Be the Biggest Test yet of Data Privacy versus Public Safety”, *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2020/06/01/why-contact-tracing-apps-will-be-the-biggest-test-yet-of-data-privacy-versus-public-safety/#1e30e1e24da2>. Accessed June 7, 2020.

³⁴ S. Cohen “Understanding Our Interconnected World and Covid-19”, *State of The Planet, Columbia*, Columbia University. <https://blogs.ei.columbia.edu/2020/03/16/understanding-interconnected-world->

as a ‘master frame’) navigated mainly three regimes of justification for convincing the audiences 1) the emotional regime, which consists of communiques with catchy headlines, titles, images (sometimes taken often out of context) and mainly expressed in Twitter and Facebook by everyday users 2) the militant regime, which consists of texts with an explicitly activist orientation calling for a radical reorganization of everyday and institutional practices, shared for instance by groups such as Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Direct Action Everywhere (DxE) and 3) the scientific regime, which includes articles or studies written by scientists, professors and research teams and which the authors navigating the emotional or militant regimes frequently use to back their claims.

The first frame that emerged almost immediately with the spread of the pandemic in Europe is that of ‘humans are the biggest virus’. This idea has been expressed in different variations and ways of storytelling and circulated in Twitter and Facebook among other social media often through photos and emotional headlines. Many of these posts were later flagged as fake news and removed from these platforms. As a case in point, the post by the Twitter user *@ThomasSchulz* (Fig. 1) claiming that the “earth is recovering” with “air pollution slowing down, water pollution clearing up and natural wildlife returning home” gained as of per March 17 300,000 likes and more than 70,000 retweets. This post was later removed, yet variations of it continue to be circulated and shared during the first wave of the pandemic. Also, ironic posts against the tweet were massively circulated with users posting pictures of beaches supposedly depicting cities that have been ‘recovered’ during the pandemic. Extremely popular were also posts showing a supposed rehabilitation of animal life that appeared to be reconquering urban or natural landscapes. This was the case with a post claiming that “dolphins returned to Venice” (Fig. 2) and a post arguing that a liberated group of “elephants drunk wine” (Fig. 3), both with almost 1 million likes and 300.000 retweets at the time of writing. These posts were later proven fake as the images that accompanied them came from contexts unrelated to Covid-19. Despite them being fake, the users posting them often employed justifications from the scientific regime or respected media authorities to prove their relevance. For instance, when Twitter users pointed out that the dolphin photos were out of context, *@ikaveri*, the user that shared the viral “dolphins returned to Venice” post, justified their decision not to remove it on the grounds that while the photos are out of context the main idea of the post is relevant. They did that by providing links containing scientific sources in respected media platforms. The ‘spirit’ of the post then was essentially true since other reports confirmed the fact that Venetian waters indeed partially cleared. This shows the reflexivity of users and fast recursivity of information in new media circulation, in which the distinction between truth and fake news is blurred and becomes a matter of interpretation. Thus, while this category of posts was purely emotional and although their truth status was disputed, the users found ways to partly re-legitimize them by pointing to ‘scientific’ articles (or articles written by media authorities like Al Jazeera and Forbes).

covid-19/. Accessed June 3, 2020 and M. Quinney, “Covid-19 and Nature Are Linked. So Should Be the Recovery”, *Weforum*, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/covid-19-nature-deforestation-recovery/>. Accessed June 1, 2020 and J. Goodall, “Covid-19 Should Make Us Rethink Our Destructive Relationship with the Natural World”, *Slate*, <https://slate.com/technology/2020/04/jane-goodall-coronavirus-species.html>. Accessed June 3, 2020.

Figure 1 - *Taken from Twitter 18/04/2020*Figure 2 - *'Dolphins returned to Venice'. Taken from Twitter 08/06/2020*

Figure 3 - 'Group of elephants drunk wine'. Taken from Twitter 10/06/2020



The second frame – ‘against animal exploitation’ – was mostly put forward by activist groups who saw to Covid-19 an opportunity to raise further awareness on the issue. The main concept behind this frame is that since Covid-19 has been transmitted to humans from animals, animal agriculture poses a major risk for the spreading of similar diseases in the future because of the horrid farming conditions. This has been a well-circulated narrative during the pandemic and was promoted by different individuals and activist groups. For instance, during the pandemic, the animal liberationist group DxE, which is invested in the idea of abolishing animal farming and meat consumption in general, organized actions and drafted a document titled #CANCELANIMALAG. This document involved policy recommendations to the governor of Sacramento in the USA and the hashtag #CANCELANIMALAG was subsequently extensively used in Twitter and Instagram to promote the particular frame. In this document, DxE calls animal farming as the “the root cause of pandemic disease” and “the link between animal agriculture and pandemic disease”, pointing out “the existential threat posed by animal ag”³⁵. Thus,

³⁵ C. King, “Animal Rights Activists Protest at CA State Capitol to Stop “Cancel Animal AG”, *DxE*, <https://www.directioneverywhere.com/theliberationist/2020/3/24/animal-rights-activists-protest-at-ca-state-capitol-to-cancel-animal-ag>. Accessed June 6, 2020.

the pandemic offered the opportunity for DxE to intensify its rationale and expand the justification of militancy for abolishing animal exploitation, as the latter does not result only in animal suffering but, crucially, also in human suffering; namely, it would be beneficial both to humans and non-humans to abolish animal farming. To justify this, DxE linked to the scientific regime, pointing, for instance, to published research that proves the connection between animal farming and the emergence of new viruses. This provided the grounds for linking climate change not only to the fossil economy but also to animal agriculture: “While the fossil fuel industry has been the focus of public policy to combat climate change, animal agriculture has also been cited as a major contributor”. In turn, in an open letter, the livestock industry attempted to delegitimize DxE’s frame by again bringing up the scientific frame (“ongoing research”) and reterritorializing the debate within anthropocentrism (“Our world needs the contributions of livestock” and “Globally, 1.3 billion people depend on livestock for their employment, while billions more rely on livestock to provide food for their families”)³⁶. While these appear as supposedly rational industry responses, they further mobilize the emotional regime to lure their readers which is a very usual industry justification tactic. This happened for example by invoking the “economy” and the “families” that will lose their jobs or by making use of the ideological phrase “our world”, which obscures hierarchies and structures of privilege. This immediate disputing that points to alternative authorities and regimes of justification demonstrates again the recursivity of online information, in the sense that ecological narratives can be immediately countered by invoking other authorities and regimes of reasoning.

Figure 4 - Fb ‘direct action everywhere’. Accessed 05/06/2020



³⁶ Livestock Open Letter, “Open Letter on the Value of Animal Agriculture” <https://medium.com/@LivestockLetter/open-letter-on-the-value-of-animal-agriculture-97ab380271f6>. Accessed June 6, 2020.

The third frame, the ‘lifestyle change’, amplifies the second and argues for a larger change in our daily habits. Apart then from animal farming, this frame argues for less travelling and less consumption and more engagement with locality and community. This frame has been used not only from actors related to environmental activism but reached more widely anti-capitalist movements. For instance, Rupert Read, one of the spokespersons of EX, addresses in one of his YouTube videos the pandemic as a situation that “contains within it an enormous opportunity” and calls environmental activists to “turn crisis into an opportunity”. ‘Lifestyle change’ is an overall rationale for EX, whose principles prioritize values related to community and solidarity over profits and imperatives of growth. As Read put it for the occasion: “The consumer society is built upon a concept of ‘wants’ while now we been forced down into the concept of needs”³⁷. The distinction between ‘wants’ and ‘needs’ is key for anti-consumerist movements at least since the 1960s and 1970s and it is here mobilized on the grounds that the pandemic revealed the ‘truth’ of this distinction by forcing us to reduce consumption. The coronavirus and the climate and ecological crisis invoke, for EX, “our global *interconnectedness* and vulnerability...[as] [n]either can be solved while politicians prioritize economic growth over the health of people and the planet”³⁸. This is then a plea for a larger systemic change that needs to pass through the frame of ‘lifestyle change’. In May 2020, EX was active among other environmental actors, such as Greta Thunberg’s FFF, in promoting the so called #ClimateStrikeOnline, which involved people holding signs against climate change and posting them in social networks amidst isolation. #ClimateStrikeOnline has been used in tens of thousands of posts mainly in Instagram and Twitter. This type of protest is characteristic of the premise of ‘interconnection in isolation’: interconnection is mainly maintained through a digital relationality of uploading and sharing and its experience happens through computer screens. Almost immediately, EX’s claims on larger lifestyle change for battling the ecological crisis was dismissed and attacked by antagonistic actors who saw EX serving some hidden agenda³⁹.

6. CONCLUSIONS: INTERCONNECTION IN ISOLATION

The frames above used the digital space to raise awareness on ecological issues during the time of Covid-19. To start with, the immense popularity of posts from the ‘we are the virus’ attests to the fact that overloaded images of animal affection are important vehicles for raising users’ reactions and can do so quicker than complex scientific pieces. But these images are not enough to create lasting regimes of truth. For this reason, affective animal images, as we saw with the Twitter user’s reflexivity or with the ‘against animal exploitation’ framework, can be more effectively accompanied with rationales from the scientific regime: the emotional regime is the strongest for mobilizing quick responses to environmental problems but the weakest in claiming ‘truth’ as it can be easily disputed. In turn, the militant regime is a powerful vehicle for mobilizing the imaginary of ‘acting upon’ but again needs the scientific to legitimize its viewpoints to more ‘serious’

³⁷ R. Read, “What If We Looked Down?”, *XR Talk*, on YouTube Live”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKv5IImLv-c>. Accessed June 10, 2020.

³⁸ “Coronavirus Response”, *EX*, <https://www.xrebellion.nyc/coronavirus-response>. Accessed June 10, 2020.

³⁹ D. Rose, “Revealed: Extinction Rebellion’s Plan to Exploit the Covid Crisis”, *Spectator*, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/revealed-extinction-rebellion-s-plans-to-exploit-the-covid-crisis>. Accessed June 9, 2020.

audiences. The scientific regime then is the only regime of justification that holds some more lasting and convincing objectivity and can be used in debates to claim legitimacy beyond emotions or militancy.

These regimes are not exhaustive of the ecological arguments put in public during the Covid-19 (one could add here the economic regime, which appears in more mainstream platforms than the ones discussed here). To go back to the tension introduced in the beginning, Slavoj Žižek refers to the two “opposed figures” that prevail in the pandemic daily lives: “those, like medical staff and carers, who are overworked to the point of exhaustion, and those who have nothing to do since they are forcibly or voluntarily confined to their homes”⁴⁰. Still, this scenario is not entirely true: those ‘who have nothing to do’ are not only productive for Internet companies through their engagements with data but often need to adjust their labouring and larger social patterns to incorporate ‘remoteness’. In this regard, the umbilical cord, mentioned in the beginning of this article, represents an overarching condition that qualitatively transfigures social and biological life instead of being a mere tool for processing tasks.

To broaden this perspective, the strong integration between the physical and digital space in all sectors (from the Internet of Things to Augmented Reality), suggested by theorists of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, becomes intensified. On the one hand, the logic of isolation, already prepared by the platform economy, has implemented a world of centripetal domestic atomization, reminding modern dystopic organizations. On the other hand, the same isolation has generated a virtual world of interconnected bodies, on the track of the MUD and avatars of the 1990s, reinforcing a neocomunitarian sense of social bonding through the mosaics of virtual meetings (the gallery view prompted by Teams, Zoom, Meet etc.) as the iconic figure of the labour transformation in a post pandemic world.

Finally, in the Covid-19 scenario there is, as argued in this article, an acceleration of the tension around the logics of embodiment and abstraction. As the virus affects the human body in its materiality, the physical is increasingly submitted to the virtual, which becomes not simply a necessity but an indispensable prosthesis or the ‘umbilical’ to the world. If ecological and system theories were based on the isomorphic ideal of holistic interconnections between the parts and the totality of the system, between nature and technology, the contemporary situation is producing unexpected effects, emphasizing the less ecological principles of organization: isolation and atomization. The ideal of human interconnection with the planet and nature is made possible through the constant engagement with the digital apparatus of communication, which paradoxically accelerates ‘disconnection’ from the natural world and captures critique in its instantaneous recursive loops.

⁴⁰ S. Žižek, *PANDEMIC!: Covid-19 Shakes the World*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2020, 1.