

The Browsing Subject: Phenomenology and the Internet on Pandemic Time

Does browsing the world through a screen change a person, especially in the context of COVID-19? Recent studies indicate that self-care, psychological well-being, and empathy may suffer. The “Californian ideology” privileges expression of the self even as digital technology tends to interrupt the modern trend towards elaborating distinct selves via texts that convey knowledge. Meanwhile, digital browsing may be fracturing attention and empathy.

As these changes proceed, legislators react to a medical and social crisis. Relaxation of business, community center, and school closures prevailed, under pressure from advocates of liberty, jobs, and pro-market economics. A rival set of regulatory reforms would prioritize fighting the virus and providing more relief to its victims as being forms of care for others. In the international domain, nationalist ideology and economic warfare intensify disparities in access to medical care, imported goods, and livelihoods. At stake is how best to take beings into care.

Keywords: digitization, regulation, care, care work, Covid-19, nationalism

1. The Subject and Care

A subject under-lies something else (Heidegger 1991). In modern metaphysics, according to Martin Heidegger, the human being under-lies every potential object, or everything/the world, and is the “emphatic” subject (Heidegger 1991). The subject feels or cares about the world.

When does the subject experience or access truth? One answer is, when its knowledge agrees or corresponds with an object or system of objects, hence the “correspondence theory” of truth. In modernity, perspectivism and relativism may articulate a new concept of truth, and will anyway cast doubt on the subject’s ability to have ideas that correspond reliably to objects (Anderson, 2017). For these modern theories, truth would be an insistence on a belief or even a form of lie, with a durable subject disagreeing with itself on what the world is (Heidegger 1991). The insistence of a true world or long-term “Being” amidst ceaseless becoming is the principal form of this truth-as-lie (Heidegger 1991). In modernity, *people* make the seventy-seven heavens real, even though all the heavens do not correspond with one another or with the objective heavens.

The nihilism of the modern subject arises in part from a comparison of the ever-changing world posited by atomic theory, evolution, cultural anthropology, etc. with the meaningful world of essences posited by ancient religions and their metaphysics (Heidegger 1991). In a Platonic sense, there can be no real knowledge of becoming due to its impermanence (Schopenhauer, 1969); in other words, the subject must know the eternal or anchor its knowledge in the eternal, or it knows nothing (perhaps more precisely, knows of a being that soon will not be). When the subject projects its desire for eternal truths on a changing facticity, nihilism may result, or the

perception or judgment that facts are not real or have no meaning (Heidegger 1991).

1.1. Care for the Self

“Care” conveys many meanings. To consider or to “take” care of something is one meaning, as in a very early philosophical maxim: “Take into care beings as a whole” (*melata to pan*) (Heidegger 1991). Another meaning implicates desire, an ideal, and a life’s purpose, with the human being or the subject as a being-there (*Dasein*), thrown into an existence with a past and an uncertain future, striving to get from here to there (Heidegger, 1972; Heidegger, 1986; Krell 1993). Time structures the existence of the being that is “there,” that is conscious and alive. Another sense of “care” is prominent in psychological theory as well as philosophies of the body and its maladies; an “ethic of care” in this sense is a morality structured in part around caring relationships and feelings for/with the Other (Gilligan 1982; Tronto, 1988). An ethic or morality of justice might view the Self and Other as distinct and opposed, while an ethic of care might experience the Self/subject in embedded ways, as Being-with-the-Other, Being-in-the-World. Finally care is a lot of work, and many have argued that it deserves to be better compensated to promote fairness, to reward benefits conferred upon society and the economy, and to encourage further efforts at providing much-needed care (Littleton, 1987).

Virtue, for some of the ancients, meant lifelong correspondence of the soul with itself, or with an excellent essence of itself (Schopenhauer, 1969, citing Zeno). For Heidegger and the existentialists he influenced, the challenge of the self, as for some of the ancients, is to care for and “take care” of what is one’s own or ownmost, which is being “authentic” (*Eigentlich*) (Escudero, 2013; Heidegger, 1972; Heidegger, 1986; Krell 1993; Sartre, 1956). The authentic

self may be transparent to itself, which is a way of accessing the truth even for the later Heidegger, who referred to truth as a clearing or lighting, as of the illuminated visibility of a field where one stands (Escudero, 2013; Krell 1993).

The question whether we should care at all has vexed philosophy. Schopenhauer famously argued that “nothing in human affairs is worth any great anxiety [Gr.: *spondaes*],” citing Plato, Cicero, St. Augustine, the religious prophets, and the poets (Schopenhauer, 1899, citing Plato, 1873). A reduction in care, conceived of not only as desire but also as attachment in relationships, could reduce suffering and bring true peace and wisdom.¹ Kierkegaard disagreed, conceiving of truth as faith and defining “the highest truth attainable for an *existing individual*” as a doubtful proposition “*held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness*” (Kierkegaard, 1973). The prophet Abraham is torn by intense care of this type for both Yahweh and Isaac, and Kierkegaard portrays prophetic faith as granting access to a unique truth; this is achieved by relinquishing an absolute care for a specific Other in order to be granted the ethical status of an embedded Self back from the absolute Other, or God, as a gift (Kierkegaard, 1983). Care for the absolute Other leads to truth, for Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard, 1973). Care for the self leads on the other hand to “despair,” as mastery of self is impossible for a free subject, leaving the subject a “king without a [stable] country” (Kierkegaard, 1980).

Post-structuralist and postmodernist philosophy in the 20th century took a different and perhaps more imaginative view of the self. In response to questions about whether people in California

¹ By contrast, while Plato’s Athenian Stranger preached a “proto-Stoic” viewpoint (McAleer, 2020), it was tempered by an insistence on reasoned action to solve life’s challenges. Plato’s text describes “recollection of our troubles and ... lamentation” as attitudes that are “irrational, indolent, and cowardly” (Plato, 1873).

were successfully living an ethic of diversity, a “search for styles of existence as different from each other as possible” and an ideal of self-overcoming, Michel Foucault stated:

I am afraid that in most of those cases, most of the people think if they do what they do, if they live as they live, it is because they know the truth about desire, life, nature, body, and so on.... In the Californian cult of the self, one is supposed to discover one's true self, to separate it from that which might obscure or alienate it, to decipher its truth thanks to psychological or psychoanalytic science, which is supposed to tell you what your true self is. (Foucault, 1988)

Foucault displaces this theme of "self-discovery" or "expressive liberation" with one of "self-invention" and innovation; one goes about "composing a script for oneself" (Miller,), for the sake of which "a studious transformation, a slow arduous process of change" is undertaken (Foucault, 1988). With his experimentalism Foucault takes up a Nietzschean motif of self-creation, the "burning need to create for oneself a personal originality" (Miller,). Finally, the script, experiment, and transformation of an aesthetics of existence can beautify the Self. In response to the question of what a non-disciplinary ethics might look like, Foucault responds:

What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life? (Foucault, 1984)

Foucault challenges us to ask ourselves whether the cloistering and professionalization of art misconceives the relationship between art and life, or whether on the other hand we might consider that:

The principal work of art which one has to take care of, the main area to which one must apply aesthetic values, is oneself, one's life, one's existence. (Foucault, 1984)

Some societies, or historical phenomena within societies, which might have illustrated this idea according to Foucault are ancient Greece, the Renaissance, and nineteenth century Dandyism.

Foucault's work on the ancients in general and the Stoics in particular was where he developed his vision of “the will to live a beautiful life” (Foucault, 1984). In appearing to endorse some

tenets of ancient Stoicism, Foucault's account of these tenets emphasizes that Stoic ethics was not "an attempt to normalize the population" but problematized "personal choice" (Foucault, 1984). Thus "the moralities of antiquity ... were essentially a practice, a style of liberty" (Foucault, 1988). Regarding the Stoics, Epicureans, and other schools, Foucault contends that they problematized the practice of self to diversify life forms:

It was a question of knowing how to govern one's own life in order to give it the most beautiful possible form (in the eyes of others, of oneself, and of the future generations for which one might serve as an example). That is *what* I tried to reconstitute: the formation and development of a practice of self whose aim was to constitute oneself as the worker of the beauty of one's own existence. (Foucault, 1988).

Foucault also depicted an aesthetics/ethics of self in "*dandysme*" as conceived by Baudelaire. He writes:

Modernity for Baudelaire ... is a mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself. The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an indispensable asceticism. To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of passing moments; it is to take oneself as an object of a complex and difficult elaboration: what Baudelaire, in the vocabulary of the day, calls *dandysme* ... [] the asceticism of the dandy who makes of his body, his behavior, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art. Modern man ... is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not "liberate man in his own being"; it compels him to face the task of producing himself. (Foucault, 1984)

Modernity as *dandysme* figures as the counterpart of Enlightenment insofar as Enlightenment destabilizes the subjectivity produced through domination. Enlightenment self-interrogation and self-elaboration challenge the essence of humanity with a permanent critique. It makes the "that-which-is" appear as the "that-which-might-not-be," and opens a space of freedom where self-invention might be pursued. Modernity promises liberation from facticity, but at what cost?

1.2. The Browsing Subject

Media studies pioneers such as Edward Bernays, Marshall McLuhan, and Quentin Fiore

attempted to analyze how life and subjectivity changed in an age of moving pictures and electronic transmission of sounds. McLuhan wrote that the film recalls and builds on the achievements of the book, often fusing the knowledge from many books as when a Shakespeare play is filmed after extensive research has located the right scenery, costume design, and objects to compose each frame (McLuhan, 1986). Radio as an electric medium helps simulate a global village (McLuhan, 1986). Finally television bombards the mind with so many choices and landscapes that returning attention to the book and mere ideas is a challenge that begins in our childhood and may never end:

Electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of ‘time’ and ‘space’ and pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men.... [¶] Today’s television child is attuned to up-to-the-minute ‘adult’ news—inflation, rioting, war, taxes, crime, bathing beauties—and is bewildered when he enters the nineteenth-century environment [of books] that still characterizes the educational establishment where information is scarce but ordered and structured by fragmented, classified patterns, subjects, and schedules....

As new technologies come into play, people are less and less convinced of the importance of self-expression. Teamwork succeeds private effort.... [¶] In television, images are projected at you. You are the screen. The images wrap around you. You are the vanishing point.

(McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). Television challenged the subjectification of life via books and texts.

In some of his writings and lectures on television cultures, Jean Baudrillard echoed McLuhan and Fiore in questioning the significance of traditional conceptions of knowledge.

Contemporary media and signs deregulate the world, in Baudrillard’s view, dissolving the laws that make a certain kind of knowledge possible (Baudrillard, 2010). The United States, in this media-saturated environment, “dominate[s],” the world, which revolves around it as a virtual being that proliferates signs and statements in a “masquerade” and “parody” of democracy and reality (Baudrillard names Bush, but other names come to mind). Baudrillard also recalls the teachings of the founder of public relations, Edward Bernays, that events can be “planned” and

“imaginatively managed” to alter the “attitudes and actions” of the public, to “engineer” consent (Bernays, 1947). Media can make you care, or not care, according to Bernays and others. The United States, Baudrillard implies, has some kind of magnetic or centripetal power over media.

But how can anyone dominate a world losing its coherence? Domination or mastery can take the form of a “generalized exchange,” which amounts to the “depreciation of all value” and with it an immunity of “the system” from critical reason in that the Enlightenment ideal of exposing illusion with reality is undermined by the rise of the hyperreal, which does not need reality (Baudrillard, 2010). The election of Arnold Schwarzenegger to Governor of California, in Baudrillard’s commentary, “proved [America’s] imaginary power because no one can equal it in its headlong course into the democratic masquerade, into the nihilist enterprise of liquidating value and a more total simulation than even in the areas of finance and weapons” (Baudrillard, 2010). Baudrillard alludes here to his analyses of the detachment of finance capital in the age of complex derivatives from the reality of production and exchange, and the liberation of war and weaponry from the grounded experience of combat (resulting in the rise of Nintendo or Xbox warfare using “smart bombs” and in the future, smart germs and smart dust—micro-robots).² Of course, for those killed, injured, or frightened by wars ranging from Iraq-Kuwait-United Nations

² “Smart bombs” in Baudrillard’s conceptual multiverse are the precision-guided munitions that produce a ‘cleaner’ war by having cameras attached to their noses, whose feeds television networks transmitted to global publics—generally in a clip leading up to the moment of an impact destructive to the camera and resulting in few or no pictures of killing, maiming, and driving people into deserts in fear (Patton 1995). Less often televised were the more typical Iraq War (II) munitions, more than 20,000 conventional bombs dropped by B-52 bombers from an altitude of 40,000 feet on Iraq’s towns and cities (Lippman, 2002). A sophisticated smart bomb of 21st century warfare will utilize a computer attached to the tail of a bomb to communicate with positioning system satellites to guide the bomb to its target, often one identified via satellites and computers well in advance (Lippman, 2002). “Smart germs” would be engineered bacteria or viruses that target an ethnic or racial Other, presumably using some aspect of the Other’s genome, while “smart dust” or “neural dust” could be comprised of swarms of nanotechnology computers/robots that could be used as a medical intervention in precision contexts such as the nervous system, or as a weapons platform (Australia Broadcasting Corporation, 2001; Makin, 2016; Wikipedia 2021). Perhaps just as terrifying is the prospect of “smart rocks,” asteroids or meteors which might be guided to targets on Earth using computers and rockets attached to the objects and communicating via satellites (Kellner, 2002).

in 1990-1991 to Bosnia-Croatia-Yugoslavia-NATO in 1992-1999 and beyond, the media or “hyperreality” did not supplant or transcend the weapons and casualties. Still, for billions of television viewers a simulacra or hyperreal world was erected – a history with no object that it represents or tells the true story of (Baudrillard, 2010; Bignell, 2004; Der Derian, 1994). The belligerent leaders themselves may have experienced a simulation, Iraq simulating an American response to an invasion of Kuwait even before embarking on the latter, America also simulating the ground war against Iraq on a daily basis even before it began, and publics (including Congress) suffering a “war of spectacle ... on the media battlefield” (Der Derian, 1994; see also Baudrillard 1991).

Mute, the journal of Internet culture, published frequently on the browsing subject during the rise of the Web and hypertext. A constant theme was the problem of representation in the digital age. Hypertext, one article noted, promised a kind of interactive and excessive reading that produced a new text out of every seemingly fixed story or report (Cameron, 2008). On the other hand, the social organization of virtual realities and games tended to reinforce a certain kind of narrative and political regime, one in which a “virtual class” of entrepreneurs, engineers, and professional communicators fought for wealth and disregarded the segregated Other in a cyber free-for-all (Barbrook & Cameron 1995). This “Californian Ideology rejects notions of community and of social progress and seeks to chain humanity to the rocks of economic and technological fatalism” (Barbrook & Cameron 1995). Neil Postman called it a “technopoly” in which human choice is lost (Postman 1995). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) took up the paradox highlighted by Baudrillard, Barbrook/Cameron, and Postman, and gave it a name – Empire, or a system of domination in which the imperial center is itself shattered into networks of multinational

corporate influence, high-speed financial and communications flows, and irregular subjectivities.

Browsing hypertext might contribute to a dissolution of reason. Reason is a power of gaining and communicating knowledge via speech, broken up into words (Schopenhauer, 1969). An idea or representation “sends,” in a way, knowledge purporting to be of the object or thing-in-itself (Schopenhauer, 1969). The socialist realists such as Gyorgy Lukács (1971) criticized modernist literature and poetry for disrupting the reliable transmission of meanings from subject to subject via text.³ The text or Word, in this view as perhaps also for Heidegger, gathers and enlightens, while hypertext may fragment and obscure (Heidegger 1993).⁴ “Hypertextual and non-linear structures promise [Roland] Barthes’ writerly text, never far from the possibility of rewriting, multivocal, decentred, without boundaries, a text which can break free from the chains of closure, a text whose instability lies not in our post-modern apprehension of it but in its very condition of being” (Cameron, 2008). An instability of the text would seem inimical to reason.

The browsing subject experiences an acceleration of time, a collapsing of space, and an enhanced insertion of the cares and selves of others into its field of perception and feeling (Lash, 2001; McLuhan, 1969). In Baudrillard’s view, this subject may lose connection with conventional reality, and may enter a hyperreality of signs and simulacra dominated by “America.”⁵

1.3. Being-Towards-a-Screen as Carelessness of Self

³ See also Lukács (2016).

⁴ *Logos/legein*, speech or reasoning, is also in archaic Greek a gathering or counting, and perhaps by extrapolation and “in ancient Greek philosophy and early Christian theology, the divine reason [or plan/gathering of beings] implicit in the cosmos, ordering it and giving it form and meaning” (Britannica.com 2021).

⁵ Baudrillard also believed that the subject may lose touch with its history as well as its present. “History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth.” Without such “referentials,” the fall “of the real and of the rational ... open[s] onto an age of simulation” (43).

Being-towards-death, for example, is a stance of varying degree of resoluteness as the subject contemplates its own nonexistence due to the passage of time and the facticity in which one lives. The “thereness” of a subject’s being will be lost as other subjects and objects of which the subject has knowledge will vanish from view (Krell. 1993). In death, the subject will just be, or may disappear. Being-towards-the-other and being-in-the-world refer to modes of being-there, which could be constitutive of subjectivity but which might also be merely a phase or option presented until death or some other transition cuts the subject off from the Other and the world.

Being-towards-a-screen may be a distinguishable mode of being-there. Many screen-based tasks like reading the news, listening to music, writing books or articles, and sending or receiving messages are not qualitatively different than their offline versions, although they may happen more often than their offline counterparts, hence information overload etc. Even in ancient times, the person might be trapped repeating social forms, and partake in a robotic existence without life (*robot* meaning forced laborer in Czech) (NPR, 2011).

During the pandemic, there are reports of deteriorating health—aside even from the respiratory, circulatory, and neurological symptoms of CoV-2 infection—and potentially linked to digital browsing. The world’s largest effort to track the impact of the pandemic on mental health found that stress has increased, of course, especially on younger people whose ability to form and maintain more fragile social and economic connections has been disrupted (BBC, 2021).

“Doom-scrolling” -- or browsing charts and stories of pandemic-related death, morbidity, and disruption -- may defer sleep and bring about new illnesses (BBC, 2021). Avoidance of the crowded waiting rooms that characterize U.S. doctor’s offices and hospitals may lead to millions

of cancers and cardiovascular disorders failing to be diagnosed when they need to be (WKOW, 2021). Meantime, the processing of digital text, images, sounds, and video of all kinds has exploded, leading to trillions of dollars of added market capitalization for the Big Tech giants, for example. The amount of information created annually is up about sixty-fold since 2010.

A “caregiver crisis” is how some thinkers conceive of the browsing subject’s plight during the pandemic (Whiting et al., 2021). A “cycle of lack of care for the caregiver” may exist, as the demands of salaried labor and unpaid caregiving tasks puts off self-care (Bolton, 2021).

The self-care crisis involves spikes in anxiety, panic attacks, loneliness, depression, and overdose deaths (CNN 2020). In fall 2020, about a third of U.S. workers and half of U.S. elderly persons reported an increase in anxiety and depression (Torchlight 2020). As one commentator observed:

Staying inside the house 24/7 was already becoming not just the path of least resistance, but an actively facilitated lifestyle before the pandemic even hit. Now that there is a highly compelling reason to do so, there will be more and more infrastructure built or altered to support it: delivery everything, new and better ways to telecommute, telesocialise, receive telemedicine....

I don't think we'll all become *hikkikomori* tomorrow, but there's no doubt that coronavirus is accelerating some already-underway behavioural shifts. (Robertson 2020)

Unfortunately, many people do leave their house quite a bit, but to score drugs; enough of them do so that 88,000 drug overdose deaths happened in the United States in the 12 months ending in August 2020 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2020).

2. Phenomenology and the Internet on Pandemic Time

2.1. The Phenomenology of Modernity

A phenomenology may attempt to resolve the Socratic and Cartesian paradoxes of skepticism by reversing the path of knowledge from epistemology to ontology or psychology, and proceeding from the thinking process to the reality behind or within ideas (Hegel, 1977). By replacing rumination on knowledge in theory with the experience of the “appearance” of knowledge on the ground, phenomenology aspires to Science, to an alliance with data. A science of consciousness promises to minimize the dangers of hopeless skepticism, unthinking dogmatism, and groundless speculation. It addresses the apparent “contradiction” involved in the attempt to evaluate the experience of knowledge and truth without presupposing the sort of “criterion” for truth that the epistemology of a Plato or Descartes claims to provide. It is therefore the comparison of knowing with itself, the examination of its adequacy to its own claims, of whether what it knows (the “Notion”) corresponds to its own idea of what it is to know, or its standard for truth (objectivity, the “object”), and so on. The mind will develop its own “method” without the help of Plato’s (or Hegel’s) idiosyncratic “contributions.” Knowledge will “find itself” (Hegel, 1977).

A phenomenology of modernity addresses itself to hedonism, nihilism, socialism, and other symptoms of the disenchantment with morals and ethical life. A modern consciousness attempts, in Hegel’s words, an “actualization of rational self-consciousness through its own activity,” and founders on the rock of fate, the independence of the external world from consciousness and the inevitable dashing of conscious hopes by objects (Hegel, 1977).

2.2. The Internet Phenomenon

Heidegger points out that a phenomenon is something that shows itself, from the Greek verb *phainesthai*, having the root *pha-*, or brightness/light (Heidegger, 1996). Heidegger argued that

modern information services like the newspaper operate like public transportation, turning each person into part of an undifferentiated stream, which “dissolves ... one’s own” personhood (Heidegger, 1996). Phenomenology is the peculiar mode of existing that a consciousness experiences, witnessing and thinking of one object after another, at one point in the light of truth, at others in the light of imagination or speculation (Heidegger, 1988; Heidegger, 1996).

The Internet, by bringing the universe to light and organizing it in a limitless procession of images, is like a supercharged version of a newspaper. Sherry Turkle, Nicholas Carr, and other scholars, however, point to ways in which screen time may change brains, speech, and social relations (Carr, 2011; Turkle, 2016). Turkle contends that screen time may replace social life with artificial versions of human connection mediated by computers (Turkle, 2016). Carr maintains that the Internet inculcates habits that are inimical to “calm,” “focus,” and “contemplation,” which are required for true “empathy” with others (Carr, 2011). He concludes that as time spent on the Internet “reroutes our vital [neural] paths and diminishes our capacity for contemplation, it is altering the depth of our emotions as well as our thoughts” (Carr, 2011). The danger is that rapid processing replaces empathic thought.

2.3. From Internet Time to Pandemic Internet Time

“Internet time” is a notion popularized by Andy Grove, Chairman of the Board of Intel, who observed that it operates at three times the speed of clock time, and nine times that of government time (which is of course one-third the speed of clock time) (Mazurek, 1999). Does living at three times the speed of our ancestors give us more or less time to devote care to the self, or to the Other? On the one hand, like The Flash or Quicksilver of film and comics lore, a

faster being may examine each person and object in greater detail than normal, as time seems to slow down relative to the frame of the world. On the other, such a being may pass others in a blur, barely taking note of their individuality as it races around the globe several times a second.

Pandemic time displays some of the same interruptions or deferments of empathy as Internet time. It became a cliché to say that the pandemic “shined a light” on longstanding disparities, injustices, and public policy crises. The browsing subject may have neglected the generational, ethnic, and national Other during the COVID-19 pandemic. Casting a jaundiced eye across reams of data and projections, bean-counters at the Centers for Disease Control and elsewhere minimized the need for the young and persons without a terminal illness to be treated early for COVID-19, and prioritized the very elderly and sometimes frontline hospital workers for vaccination. Viral transmission spiraled out of control as little was being done in 2021 in many places to prevent viral replication inside the bodies of the infected (Forrest et al., 2020). Young and middle-aged persons with preexisting conditions that hike COVID-19 deaths were left anxious and scrambling (Kenan and Ehley, 2021). African-Americans and Hispanics being younger on average, their vaccination rate lagged their share of population by as much as half after the first two months of administering first doses, and their total chance of death was double the chance among non-Hispanic white Americans over the pandemic’s first year (Kenan and Ehley, 2021). African-Americans and Hispanics were also disproportionately likely to be among the health care workers who died of COVID-19, as “[w]idespread shortages of masks and other personal protective gear, a lack of covid testing, weak contact tracing, inconsistent mask guidance by politicians, missteps by employers and lax enforcement of workplace safety rules by government regulators all contributed to the increased risk faced by health care workers”

(Spencer and Jewitt, 2021). The shortage of masks, tests, and treatments was foreseeable to scholars of patent law, pandemic preparedness, and privatization in general.

Previously, number-crunchers at corporate hospitals and health maintenance organizations, abetted if not encouraged by allied bureaucrats at the federal, state, and local levels, allowed hospital beds to be torn out of hospitals or closed to the public as a result of mergers or hospital closures, leading to denials of adequate care, triage, and excess pain and suffering particularly in inner-city and rural areas (Flynn and Knox 2020; Shain 2020). Public hospitals in particular bore the brunt of austerity measures, losing hundreds of beds in places like Queens, New York (Robinson 2020). Patients were often told to go home and come back if they can't breathe, rather than being treated early like famous politicians or the wealthy with monoclonal antibodies, antiviral pills, etc., or even with generic and affordable steroids, antihistamines, anti-inflammatories, guanadines, immunosuppressives, antivirals, or high doses of vitamins and minerals.

The socioeconomic Other – the imprisoned, impoverished, or undocumented person – was disproportionately exposed to death and disability relating to COVID-19. Recklessness was the term often used on television and the Internet to refer to the attitude of those in power during this looming crisis (Sachs 2020). Prisoners occasionally sought compassionate release due to heightened risk of severe illness due to their obesity, advanced age, former smoker status, hypertension, etc., but this was denied by some courts on grounds of lack of “extraordinary” proof of risk (United States 2020; United States 2020a). Farmworkers were especially vulnerable to transmission of the disease in cramped housing and joint work details, yet calls for

strict mandatory guidelines were seemingly ignored in favor of more voluntary virus-specific guidance and a general rule that a workplace must be safe of hazards (Crampton 2020).

Still, the United States distinguished itself by the sheer amount of fiscal and monetary stimulus and support provided by federal, state, and local governments to persons threatened in their lives or livelihoods by the pandemic. By one estimate, stimulus checks, unemployment benefits, (refundable) child tax credits, and rental assistance financed in large part by the federal government averaged about \$100 billion per month in 2020, versus a shortfall in wages and salaries of \$25 billion per month due to the impact of the virus and public health mitigation measures (Wallace-Wells, 2021). The amount held by U.S. households in savings soared, even as sanctioned nations, prisoners, the homeless, and farmworkers struggled with a lack of soap and water or other hygiene supplies and from an inability to keep a safe distance to avoid exposure to the virus. In terms of foreign aid, the United States remained the single largest contributor to vital programs for the hungry, sick, and homeless in other countries via the World Food Program and other international organizations (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

Intergenerational carelessness, long typified in the United States by the two-track health care system involving Medicare and non-Medicare, single-payer and for-profit-free-for-all, surfaced during the pandemic in another way. Researchers linked to Harvard, Yale, and/or Physicians for a National Health Program estimate that Medicare for All or a National Health Service would save about 100,000 persons per year from death due to COVID-19 alone, as well as 68,000 or more persons threatened with death each year due to other causes (Galvani et al., 2020; Woolhandler et al., 2021). Comparable industrialized nations experienced half as many

hospitalizations per capita and half or fewer as many deaths per capita (Public Citizen, 2021; Our World in Data, 2022). Yet there is no political will to enact it, even though politicians promised to do so while running as progressive or democratic socialist candidates.

Critics of public health mitigation measures, or “lockdowns,” used the negative consequences of Zoom school on young children as a key plank in their arguments. In Sweden, where younger students continued their schooling without distancing or masks, the resulting infection rates were not provably worse than in some other countries in which school was held virtually (Miltimore 2020). The world’s young children, in this view, lost months of education and socialization and incalculable aggregate earning power for few or unproven public health gains. Meanwhile, the national debt incurred in large part to prop up lavish lifestyles among the over-65 cohort will greatly limit the options of the next generation. Interest payments on the national debt (at 200% or more of GDP by 2050) could exceed discretionary spending (i.e. spending on youth and the middle-aged, not counting Medicaid) in the 2030s, and could be triple nondefense discretionary spending by 2050 (Gray, 2021; Riedl, 2021). If interest rates soon reach five percent or more to tamp down inflation, this problem will get much worse, for congressional estimates of interest rates sit at around 2% for most of the 2020s and do not hit 5% in nominal terms until after 2050 (Reidl, 2021). Each point of higher interest rates over congressional estimates will add \$30 trillion to the national debt over 30 years (Reidl, 2021). At interest rates of 6.5%, every dollar of incoming tax revenue at the federal level may be spent on servicing a debt of 300% of GDP (Reidl, 2021).

The end of a serious local impact of the pandemic could arrive in some parts of the world as herd

immunity results from more than 90% of the population receiving vaccinations or generating antibodies from live virus exposure. Both inside the United States and in the rest of the world, however, a combination of delayed exposure and lower vaccination rates could drag out the pandemic for years (Emont, 2021). Brazil, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and the Philippines are examples, riding large second or third waves in 2021 to new peaks in deaths and infections even as cases receded in California or England (Emont, 2021). The variants spreading in Brazil and the Philippines threatened other parts of the world where vaccinations, particularly of those under the age of 75, were not being carried out rapidly enough (Kenan & Ehley, 2021). A bioethicist also expressed concerns that vaccination sign-ups were easier for “mobile, digitally savvy people,” who could drive to other cities or seek out distant appointments digitally; this was not a prescription for achieving herd immunity by reaching the bulk of the population (Kenan & Ehley, 2021). The developing world and allies in the most-developed nations condemn this “vaccine nationalism” reflective of a degree of carelessness for the national Other.⁶

A lack of care for the national Other emerges in even more dramatic fashion when nations are subjected to the cruelty of a contemporary “method of siege warfare,” or the use of human labor and needs as a weapon, often devastating vital imports of humanitarian or health-care supplies (Doran, 1998). At a contentious meeting of the Security Council during the pandemic, Russia accused the United States of choking out the people of Iran, using economic sanctions (Lynch 2020). An Iranian human rights activist pointed out, the most intense sanctions date to the Obama administration; they prohibit most financial transactions between Iran and the rest of the

⁶ For example, the Director-General of the World Health Organization publicized a study indicating that “vaccine nationalism could cost the global economy up to US\$ 9.2 trillion” through inequitable access to doses and to the resulting progress in fighting COVID-19 and returning to ‘normal’ levels of economic and social intercourse (WHO 2021).

world, returning trade to a premodern form (Benjamin 2020). The results were rapid and deprived the Iranian poor from having enough food to eat, or adequate health care (Benjamin 2020). “Sanctions have become a method of warfare, denying life-saving medicines to sick people ... and plunging millions into poverty” (Benjamin 2020, quoting Sussan Tahmasebi).

Similarly, during the Obama administration the Saudi-led “coalition” blockade of nearby Yemen’s ports began, helping drive about eight million people into starvation and triggering one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world, which is saying a lot (Dourek & Kelly, 2021); Lopour, 2016). In a policy taken up eagerly by the Trump administration, the United States continued arms transfers to the blockading Saudi forces, whose offensive on Yemen’s Taiz provided an opening to al Qaeda terrorists (Lopour, 2016, citing Amnesty International, 2015; BBC, 2016). The United Nations Independent Expert on the Promotion of a Democratic and Equitable International Order observed that Chile, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Syria are also victims of “non-conventional economic wars ... in order to make their economies fail” (de Zayas, 2018). The Obama-Trump sanctions on Venezuela, for example, “directly and indirectly aggravated” shortages of essential medicines including drugs to treat HIV/AIDS (de Zayas, 2019; see also McEvoy, 2021). On Syria, a leaked U.N. report suggested that U.S.-European Union sanctions dating to the Obama administration even prevented international aid groups from importing medicines, not to mention reducing government revenue to a trickle and blocking most urban reconstruction as well as efforts to end the occupation of Syrian towns and cities by Qaeda-linked groups (de Zayas, 2019; see also Stirling 2020). Previously in Iraq, as least 500,000 child deaths occurred while the country was trying to recover from its widespread bombardment but being economically sanctioned for a decade as it did so (Bennis, 2020). Such

economic sanctions violate international law as shown by a General Assembly resolution on the comprehensive sanctions on Cuba (and since the 1990s, its trading partners), and suggested in a UN rapporteur statement on Syria (de Zayas 2018).⁷ Nevertheless, U.S. Attorney General William Barr noted that in a “‘kick them while they’re down’ approach,” the pandemic allowed the administration, “by piling on sanctions and other actions, [to] ... capitalize on the virus in Iran and Venezuela” (McEvoy 2021).

3. Towards a Legal Regime of Imposed Care for the Other?

Build Back Better is the Biden administration agenda that encapsulates a proclaimed commitment to rebound from the pandemic in a way that solves old problems and ensures preparedness for new ones. While focused on creating jobs, improving infrastructure, promoting racial and economic justice, and advancing clean energy, the slogan and President Joe Biden’s Day One publications proclaim an intention to ensure and to revitalize caring practices. Prior to the New Deal and the Great Society programs of social insurance and income support, the states looked to the family to provide care for children, the aged, and the injured or ill (Fineman, 1998). As one advocate of the Biden plan to invest in an “infrastructure of care” including Medicaid, affordable child care, etc. explained:

The “American Rescue Plan” announced recently by the US president, Joe Biden, both defines care as part of the country’s infrastructure and promises major investments in the sector....

⁷ See also Stirling, 2020. The Syria report, by a U.N. Special Rapporteur on the topic, noted that sanctions blocked the delivery of vital agricultural inputs and foodstuffs, medicines, sanitation and water-quality equipment, electricity infrastructure components, and materials needed to rebuild and resupply hospitals and schools (Stirling, 2020). U.S. sanctions conveniently exempt the illegally occupied portions of Syria functionally annexed to Turkey, and the haven of Turkish-backed, al-Qaeda-linked rebels in Idlib (Stirling, 2020). In eastern-northeastern Syria, formerly the country’s breadbasket and source of foreign exchange revenue from oil exports but now occupied by a mixture of Turkish-backed, Qaeda-backed, and U.S.-backed rebels, the land is a toxic mess where hundreds of thousands of people lack even clean water to drink (Yahoo! News 2021).

Many parents who had to work from home realised that looking after children involved hard work which is both time-consuming and energy-sapping. And many who clapped for the carers risking their lives felt that this should have led to a pay rise....

Reforms could include a much shorter standard working week, more flexible working hours, better rights for part-time workers, opportunities to work from home and extensive family/parental leave provision that both men and women are encouraged to use.

Pay and conditions in the sector also need to be reformed to recognise the importance of care work, the skills required of it, [etc.].... (Bryson 2021)

The careforce, to coin a generic term (it's already a trademark), occupies a tier of the economy not fully protected by legislation and social insurance. Unpaid care work within immediate and extended families and the like is notoriously underappreciated. Paid care work often involves low wages and the insecurity of a place in the "precariat," the class of the intermittently paid (Standing, 2014).

The devaluation of care is part of a much larger system of incentivizing and celebrating investment and property speculation, extraction of natural resources, and the international arms trade to a disproportionate and unhealthy extent. John Médaille and other "distributivists" forcefully argue that socialists diagnosed the inequalities arising from unfair allocation of property rights as a fundamental economic problem, but proposed precisely the wrong solution: a denial of property to any but the State. The distributivist solution is to subdivide and spread property throughout human realms. In this way, bureaucratic control by both commissars and capitalist bosses will be blunted, and as many persons as possible will have the freedom to reject labor contracts based on the possibility of having recourse to property income. Moreover, a "wider distribution of property is not so much about what the government should do as about what it should stop doing: bolstering wealth accumulation by a few "through subsidies, privileges, tax breaks, monopolies, externalized costs, and the like" (Médaille 2012).

Might a “Care Economy” be possible, with better building back? Rushkoff (2017) sees worker-owned firms, in which property is more widely distributed than in founder-dominated public corporations, as enabling "highly reciprocal, peer-to-peer, worker-owned, and community-defined marketplaces". Crowdfunding outside banks, minting currencies outside financial systems, collaborating horizontally on writings outside of publishers, and exchanging value as equals will forge a more "sustainable prosperity" (Rushkoff, 2017). New applications and platforms offer ways of producing economic value, meaningful employment, and communicating digitally (Rushkoff, 2016; Rushkoff, 2017). The problem is that as the process of primitive accumulation by territorial expansion and resource extraction winds down, capitalism must find value in existing industries, and in their disruption. This disruption used to happen over many years and even decades, as shopping malls or Wal-Mart stores devastated Main Street economies. Once supercharged with digital efficiencies, corporations such as Amazon or Uber can perform similar feats in a matter of months or a few years. These new digital superpowers create a tenth as many jobs as the legacy enterprises did, leaving a growing number of people stuck in the precariat. The solution, Rushkoff suggests, is diversification of the legal structures governing digital firms, with public-interest organizational charters that would allow managers to value quality of service, community health, or workforce numbers and not simply shareholder value. Corporations often invest their revenue in ways that are not as socially valuable as small startups and teams of inventors. Passive income is valorized even by the tax code, which often taxes producing economic value through labor more harshly than extracting it from the economy and storing it in share prices, real estate, or cash accounts flush with dividend payments.

Žižek made the same point a few years earlier. Corporations such as Microsoft earn fabulous

profits and make their founders rich by disrupting and extracting value from social processes of communicating knowledge in standard document formats. Efficiencies of this kind threaten to make other types of workers -- typesetters, printers, distributors of paper in various forms – obsolete (Žižek, 2012). The benefits of digitization inflict costs in terms of making jobs redundant. Eventually most workers could be fired, but many are kept on as a kind of surplus bourgeoisie, earning surplus wages paid for with the surplus rents appropriated from common labors. When economic changes or cyclical fluctuations threaten even the position of these intellectual and cultural workers, in which category Žižek includes artists and journalists as well as lawyers, protests emerge in the form of Occupiers, Tea Partiers, and Bernie Bros who organize "against the threat of being reduced to proletarians." Citing Hardt and Negri but prefiguring Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty First Century*, Žižek observes that this "proletarianisation of the lower salaried bourgeoisie is matched at the opposite extreme by the irrationally high remuneration of top managers and bankers (irrational since, as investigations have demonstrated in the US, it tends to be inversely proportional to a company's success)" (Žižek, 2012).

In the U.S. Senate, a proposal to force a certain obligation to care on allegedly reckless social platforms may be taken up in 2021. The Safeguarding Against Fraud, Exploitation, Threats, Extremism and Consumer Harms (SAFE TECH) Act would restrict the scope of the 'publisher/distributor immunity' or 'intermediary immunity' that tech giants enjoy. It appeared in a media and political environment with well-established milestones: Fake News, Trump/Russia 2016, Cambridge Analytica, Revenge Porn, Deepfakes, "The Big Lie," "The Insurrection." The idea seems to be that Facebook and YouTube (but maybe also Substack and Patreon, Amazon and Etsy, TikTok and Telegram) would be legally accountable for libel,

privacy violations, incitements, frauds, and counterfeits published by their users, and would thereby have an incentive to clean up the Internet, making it safe (Hatmaker 2021). This is because by accepting payment to publish the user speech – in the form of advertising revenue-sharing – the platforms would be denied a legal immunity originally designed for more passive conduits (like AT&T) or storage sites (like Dropbox) (Hatmaker 2021).

The implications of this proposal are beyond the scope of this paper, but it is one of the more ambitious efforts out there to stem the tide of unreality and “cure” the browsing subject. When we pay for enlightenment or human connection with our attention to advertisements, do we actually or rightfully expect the platform to ensure the truth and justice of what we browse? Can intermediaries actually restore the bonds between self and Other, or prevent them from fraying in the first place due to falsehood, graft, or threats? Noticeably absent from proposed legislation to impose duties of care on the Internet is the issue of incitement to siege warfare and aggression. Even within the circles of those proclaiming to care for those who don’t care enough for the Other, carelessness of the national Other may be the norm; the enemy is beneath our care.

4. Conclusion

The self accesses truth in various ways, according to whose wisdom is being taught. Whether care impedes or advances that access is a contentious issue. A certain ethic or ethics involves care for the self and/or the Other as the practice of free subjectivity. The subject might organically inhabit such an ethic from birth or early acculturation, or arrive at it by a leap of faith or of empathy after some time in which the Other seemed distant or inaccessible.

Aspects of digital communication and the Internet economy might reduce care. While telecommunications, television, and tube sites might bring the concerns of the Other before the self, rapid Internet browsing and the information overload it involves would tend to minimize the claims to attention and care of any particular image or person. On pandemic time, the networked might prioritize their own cares, leaving those of the incarcerated, the farmworker, or the foreign subject with little attention or effort.

Concerned that Americans are losing touch with the truth and care for one another, members of Congress have impelled technology companies to control the use of reason—the faculty of speech—to try to restore the truth. Leveraging appetites for advertising dollars and loathing of business expenses, these legislators would treat Internet intermediaries and their users like newspapers and their columnists, thereby bringing journalistic standards to the Internet and social media. Although our long experience with other media that do not enjoy Internet intermediary immunities – newspapers, talk radio, and television – do not provide much cause to expect a brighter future once Facebook and YouTube are treated like NBC and Fox, there are other proposals to reform the corporate structure more thoroughly, and to bring care to the fore.

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