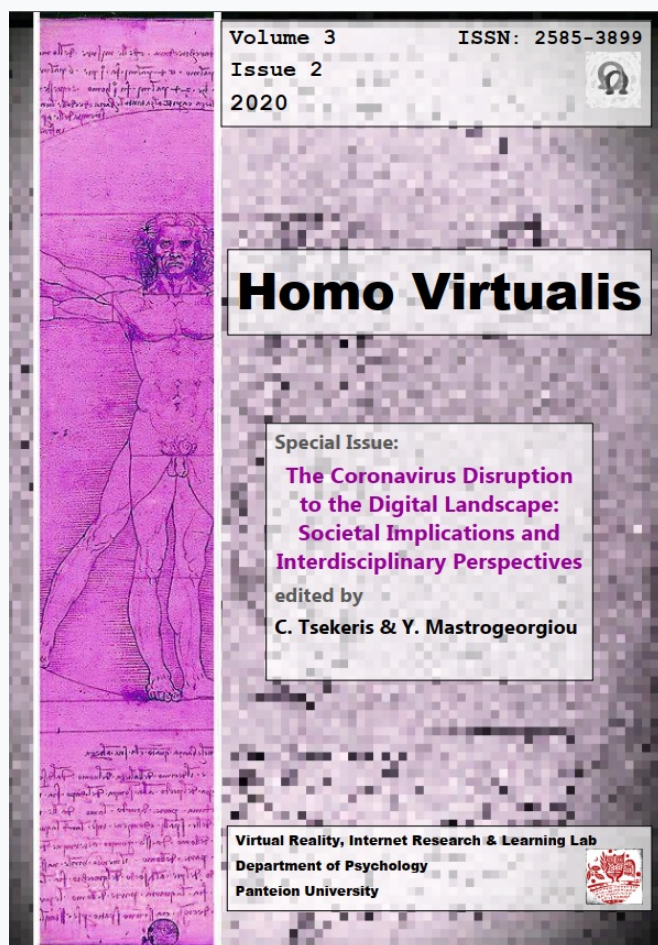


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Viral Economies

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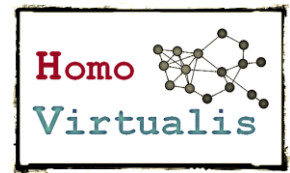
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Viral Economies

Leandros Kyriakopoulos¹

Abstract: The article examines the Covid-19 pandemic by investigating the ways in which viruses are mapped out through the biosciences and recognized as threats in informational systems. Two examples are analyzed that, although seemingly unrelated, intersect the assemblages of biological and communicational networks. The first one concerns the speed at which a third of the world's population was quarantined. The second one involves the readiness of the material-technical infrastructure to support, and the political planning to transfer, a multitude of social and labour activities onto digital platforms. The adjective 'viral' highlights the metonymic ways in which digital media locate the different economies of gene formation, circulation and communication of subjects, transport of goods and political decision-making, and adapt them in favour of the technologic of the network. And what is suggested is to view the advent of Covid-19 within the cultural logic of new media in order to understand the horizon of an oncoming modernity.

Keywords: Covid-19, Social Distancing, Digital Platforms, Post-Fordism, Acceleration

*Catastrophe is the past coming apart. Anastrophe is the future coming together.
Seen from within history, divergence is reaching critical proportions. From the
matrix, crisis is a convergence misinterpreted by mankind.*

[Sadie Plant and Nick Land, 1994]

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War, and only war, makes it possible to set a goal for mass movements on the grandest scale [...] That is how the situation presents itself in political terms. In technological terms it can be formulated as follows: only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today's technological resources while maintaining property relations.

[Walter Benjamin, 1936]

Aporia

I do not wish to examine the Covid-19 pandemic as a disease outbreak that affects the human organism, and from which it ought to be protected. I read the pandemic as the multiplication of the materiality of a virus within channels of biological, informational and communicational networks, technopolitical institutions and state structures.

What I prefer to highlight is that, insofar as viruses are mapped out in communication networks and databases, then in the 'new' (viral) economies of digital information, all organisms – including the human one – can be copied and assimilated. Therefore, by using the adjective 'viral', I mean to emphasize the metonymic ways in which digital technologies recognize the various economies of subjects' movement and communication, gene formation, transportation of commodities and political decision-making, and adapt them in favour of the technologic of the network and nominalization of social practices and flows.

There are two examples that impel me to take this view, which seem to be unrelated to each other; and while both of them are drawn from experience of the pandemic in Greece and the EU, they correspond to wider planetary issues. The first one concerns the speed with which one-third of the world's population (over three billion people)² was quarantined (and without the mortality rate to justify such an operation); both as a political decision *and* in terms of social acceptance. The second one is the readiness of the material-technical infrastructure and political planning to 'upload' a huge number of social and labour activities onto digital platforms. Veritably, within a week, great numbers of people found themselves connected to the Internet as if it were the ultimate way to physically respond to the condition of 'social distancing'.³

The increasingly denser mediation of the public sphere by various platforms' social mechanics (posts, likes, tweets, friend requests, profile-building etc.) reflects aspects

² This is according to WEF. See <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/todays-coronavirus-updates/>

³ According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), there was a 50% increase in Internet use. See <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/will-coronavirus-break-the-internet/>

of the capitalist mode of production that until recently were difficult to contextualize within a material-technical infrastructure. Creative labour, personal views, symbolic statuses, aesthetics of self, (gender) identity and ideological norms circulate and converge on social networks, producing immaterial products, desires, emotions, ideas, social movements – all translated into capital. And given that digital traces are recorded and stored as data for algorithmic management – for the purposes of statistical analysis, corporate design and the development of new generations of bio-informational media and technologies – the question of the relationship between: a) the decision to implement and general acceptance of quarantine, and b) its acknowledgement as ‘social distancing’, that can be resolved with social networking services, is not insignificant.

Event

The first case of this new coronavirus strain was identified on 12 December 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan (See Zhou et al., 2020), one of the most industrialized regions of the planetary economy – heavily urbanized, extensively polluted and with a generally low standard of living.⁴ The Chuang Collective (2020) thoroughly decentralized the origins of the pandemic from Chinese culture by situating it in a nexus of economics, geography and epidemiology. Three different pandemics occurred in the 18th century England, while the rinderpest outbreak in East Africa that was brought from Europe in the 1890s by Italian colonial forces, the case of the so-called Spanish flu – possibly originating in the USA –, Ebola, mad-cow disease, swine flu and avian flu, they argue, are different examples of how hyper-competitive agricultural environments, agroeconomic incursions into local ecosystems and the social conditions of overindustrialized areas favour the capacity for zoonotic transfer, the development of virulence, and the evolution of new transmission vectors. That so many epidemics have arisen in China lately gives us an indication of the industrial-monetary and bio-informational economy of the 21st century, and also of a pattern of financial and humanitarian crises on the timeline of capitalist evolution: the development of infectious diseases, and the intensification of technological advances in the medical sciences and modes of labour to overcome collapses and accelerate growth. The question of the effectiveness of ‘social distancing’ and the turn to digital services reflects that pattern.

⁴ For an extensive description of the sociopolitical conditions in Wuhan in relation to the outbreak of the pandemic, see <http://chuangcn.org/2020/02/social-contagion/>

The World Health Organization (WHO) recognized the spread of the virus as a pandemic on 11 February 2020, naming it Covid-19 (Coronavirus Disease-2019); and on the same day, the 'International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses' called the virus, *Coronavirus Serious Acid Respiratory Syndrome Type 2*, or SARS-CoV-2, due to the similarity of its genetic sequence to a series of related coronaviruses, and especially SARS (Jiang et al., 2020). SARS-CoV-2 is the seventh coronavirus that can infect humans, and the third zoonotic virus causing acute symptoms since SARS in 2003 and MERS in 2012. What specifically characterizes coronaviruses (and distinguishes them from other families of viruses) is their unique membrane, which is surrounded by a protein crown, hence their special name. That crown makes them more effective in the way they act as viruses: namely, assimilating the genome of a host via mechanisms of cell replication and transcription, and incorporating their genetic material into the organism, ultimately infecting it. Since the late 19th century and the discovery of *viruses* as a form of infectious agents, there has been strong interest in understanding their functioning. In point of fact, developments in the biological sciences accompany the evolutionary paths whereby (in conditions of intensified production) previously harmless and isolated strains follow in favour of their infectious empowerment.

The biological interpretation of viruses as infectious agents that survive by copying the genetic material of their host corresponds symbiotically (and metonymically) to the paradigm of computational media. The 'Sciences of Systems', and specifically cybernetics and taxonomy, have been evolving throughout the 20th century in tandem with genetics (and the mapping of viruses) and networking technologies. This family of viruses was first observed under a microscope in 1968 and given the name 'coronavirus' (Weiss & Navas-Martin, 2005), while it was in 1969 that ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network) was created; the first electronic network that was to become the matrix of today's Internet. The probative importance of SARS-CoV-2, then, lies in its specific (indeed cybernetic) mechanisms of replication and transcription, mimicry and integration, dispersion and spreading, which makes it a symptom of the new 'wildness' and zoonotic identity that (will) characterize epidemics in the 21st century. And if SARS in 2003 set the scene for observing the conditions of viral strains' mutation in the highly competitive environment of industrialized farming, it was also explored for the unknown mechanisms of zoonotic vectors.⁵ In terms of cybernetics, that is, viruses such as SARS-CoV-2 are treated as

⁵ See specifically the work of biologist Rob Wallace (2016).

mimetic agents that penetrate different biological systems in uncharted ways, being able to infect them in equally unknown sequences.

It is crucial to realize how much importance is attached by current transnational health institutions to these uncharted copying mechanisms, by examining the mortality rate of each epidemic. With the SARS virus, 774 deaths were recorded;⁶ with the MERS virus, there have been 858 recorded deaths from 2012 to date;⁷ and with SARS-CoV-2, 4,000 deaths were recorded when the WHO issued a general directive for quarantine.⁸ Again, according to the WHO, seasonal flu deaths reach 500,000 annually;⁹ the HIV virus annual death toll is 800,000;¹⁰ and annual deaths from smoking exceed 8 million.¹¹ The question is not whether SARS-CoV-2 is indeed as 'dangerous' as has been indicated. It might certainly be. It is more about the conditions that led to the political decision to implement a quarantine since there was no linear connection between SAR-CoV-2's mortality rate and the need for one. In a sentence, the decision to quarantine was not based on (biopolitical) care for the population. After SARS in 2003, as Galloway and Thacker (2006) observe, the medical 'care of the body' is continuously readjusted towards a post-Fordist kind of 'care of the data', in which the job of public health organizations is not to supervise the population but to ensure that biological bodies correlate to informatic patterns of computational calculi.

In the literature on post-Fordist capitalism (Lazzarato, 2010; Hardt & Negri 2011), there is a general concern to understand a shift towards an economy that is not based on imposing rules on production (putting codes over actions, laws over facts), but one that accelerates growth by letting things *circulate*. In post-Fordism, labour, interests, ideas, news, anxiety and personal taste (should) circulate in order for recognizable patterns to be found so that there are new network flows that will enable equivalent cultural, consumerist and pharmaceutical industries to be developed. In a landscape of wild and competitive circulation, new infectious diseases, such as Covid-19, spread rapidly precisely because they follow (and appropriate) respective public networks: transport, business partnerships, commodity networks and public services. Given that 'healthcare' in western modernity has always been bound up with statistics and databases (numbers of births and deaths, symptoms of illnesses etc.), medical-supervisory systems do indeed depend on and

⁶ See <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/factsheet-health-professionals-coronaviruses>

⁷ See <https://www.who.int/emergencies/mers-cov/en/>

⁸ For Covid-19 statistics, see <https://www.bing.com/covid>

⁹ See <https://emedicine.medscape.com/article/219557-overview#a6>

¹⁰ See <https://www.who.int/gho/hiv/en/>

¹¹ See https://www.who.int/health-topics/tobacco#tab=tab_1

use the same topological properties that constitute networks through the science of cybernetics. The lockdown of cities and household quarantine introduced with the SARS outbreak in 2003 (in Hong Kong, Singapore, Toronto), which are expanding in 2020 with SARS-CoV-2, aim to restrain those exact population flows; yet not to reduce mortality rates – these are, after all, ‘insignificant’ compared to other illnesses – but because its sequence, transmission rate and repeatability are not known, and therefore it cannot be a component part of economies of transportation, labour and the biopolitics of populations.

The Foucauldian concept of biopolitics alone is not enough to understand the decision to quarantine. Neither Agamben’s ‘state of exception’ nor the Deleuzian schizophrenic ‘limit of capitalism’ does justice to the historical conditions at hand. This is the magical realism of cybernetics, wherein viruses infect an organism through their ability to reproduce their diversity, and circulate via the transport networks of ports and airports, and where, faced with the emergence of a virus with an uncharted sequence, SARS in 2003 in particular, information networks are activated to generate new databases and make new connections between health organizations, governmental agencies, pharmaceutical companies, genetic laboratories, repressive mechanisms and financial institutions. Galloway and Thacker (2006: 160) note that for the SARS epidemic: “At the most abstract level, one witnesses information networks at play in medical surveillance systems, in which the real-time monitoring of potential public health hazards (be they naturally occurring or the result of an attack) is made possible in a ‘war-room’ scenario.” Indeed, we are at war, albeit a paradoxical kind of war.

Hence, the event we are facing is not a pandemic; to the degree that its advent was already political. What we are facing is the activation of a defence information system network due to the emergence of a biological threat with an unknown replication mechanism and contagion rate. And this defence (security) system evades human judgement and meets artificial intelligence. It is no coincidence that the Canadian outbreak risk software company *BlueDot* described the spread of the virus before the WHO had even announced it.¹² The company’s artificial intelligence analyzed hospital medical reports of unknown causes of pneumonia on a global scale. This anthropocentric attitude should not go unnoticed. It corresponds to what Plant and Land (1994: 305) note about security systems establishing a “cybernetics of stability fortified against the future”. The connections between markets, networks, surveillance systems and bio-informational technologies – contrary to any cybernetic logic about

¹² See <https://bluedot.global/>

systems – adopt a “cybernegative” (1994: 306) position, in which the human is placed at the centre of a futuristic present fraught with dangers. Like a naive adaptation of *the Terminator* movie script – where the Skynet security system attacks humans because it recognizes them as an enemy – a network of medical surveillance institutions was set up to detect threats and ‘blindly’ followed database analysis algorithms deciding on a global quarantine due to a biological agent that escaped its supervision.

Connection

The first Covid-19 cases in Greece were confirmed on 26 February 2020. By this time, the WHO had already announced a Covid-19 pandemic, and Italy was deep into its vortex of proliferating cases. Carriers of the virus turned out to be individuals who had travelled to Italy, as well as a group of pilgrims who had returned from Israel and Egypt. In spite of the bourgeois imagination about the transmission of diseases by the poor, migrants, homosexuals and drug addicts, SARS-CoV-2 took the most cosmopolitan routes of scientific and religious tourism. In this movement of bodies and viruses, one cannot dismiss Italy’s commitment to economic activity and spectacles, as with the *Milan Fashion Show* and the *European Football Championship* match between Spanish Valencia and Italian Atalanta in the city of Bergamo, which were considered ‘biological bombs’ for the spread of the virus in Spain and Italy. Nor the fact that the first cases in Greece were scientists and pilgrims, and not homeless people or refugees. The virus was able to move via the most open and affirmative networks contesting the exemplary subjects of creative labour and the welfare state. This had a direct effect on the subsequent governmental decision to implement special measures.

Cybernetics acquires viral qualities, and whilst it comprises the ‘language’ of organisms, networks and systems, it infects derivative spheres due to the assembling of the neoliberal logic of capitalism with the sciences of life and social relations. And indeed, SARS-CoV-2 does not only evade gene maps, but also evades state surveillance and security systems. And on account of the noted victims of the virus, the *cultural logic* of the pandemic – its ‘transnationality’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’ – becomes a collective consciousness. The cessation of work at sites of increased social contact (such as schools, universities and department stores, and later shopping malls, dining rooms and nightclubs) – especially in Greece, where the general directive was implemented in just the first ten days of the initial outbreak – along with the typical media’s over-coverage of cases and deaths, unprecedented in post-

war world measures; and the impending economic consequences (unprecedented as well) caused 'developed societies' to account for their personal responsibility to perform this 'war scenario' through quarantine.

The journalistic correspondence from a 'battlefront' is hence taking place in the field of physical contact, which is a risky scheme for spreading this 'invisible' threat. Only digital networks acquire surplus value in the quarantine condition on the ground that they mediate social interaction.¹³ The fact that the development of post-Fordist capitalism is attached to informational technologies is indeed important (Fisher, 2009). That the individual is responsible for 'social distancing' shows us that post-Fordist capitalism is accelerating with each crisis, spreading to societies, condensing interpersonal mediation, entering into deeper physical spheres. The social mechanics of digital platforms exemplify the mode of post-Fordism, since they have essentially been constructed for the governance (or even better the cybernetics) of the self on the basis of opinions, taste, achievements and desires (Lovink, 2019). On social media, the spectacle is not directed from top to bottom, transmitter to receiver, production centre to the market. Here, the subject is called to become the producer and consumer of its own life in a game of strategy and management. On social media, thanatostatistics, quarantine and the 'irresponsibility' of disobedient citizens are shattered and reassembled through social engineering along with ideopolitical norms, the fear of loneliness, nostalgia for lost ways of socializing, conspiracy theories (from SARS-CoV-2's deliberate manufacture to its spread via 5G mobile networks); and like viruses they reprogramme desires, particularize further the senses, and disperse new psychoses;¹⁴ eventually radiating the possibility of planetary-type political interventions.

Quarantine is not socially accepted due to the typical mode of operation of the mass media. The advent of a pandemic in terms of war shorts out the senses in favour of a state political directive, yes; but on social media, it also becomes material for positive feedback on self-management. One's personal responsibility for complying with quarantine intrinsically aids the internalization of this phase of capitalism, which is misrecognized with a new 'progressive' social contract. This is the magical realism of cybernetics. And as Mark Fisher (2009) aptly puts it, "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism". The consequences of not complying with the general directive fall into the event horizon of SARS-CoV-2 infection. For Plant and Land (1994: 308), the end of the world seems more like the terminus of this

¹³ For a critical take on the politics of social distancing and (digital) integration, see Elena Esposito (2020).

¹⁴ For a study defining a research agenda concerning the changes in interpersonal relationships in the aftermath of the Covid-19, see Vincenzo Romania (2020).

“interactive runaway”, which markets and technics cross into. Each crisis furthers their convergence; and each of crisis’ spectaculization awakens any somatic experience of history and tradition to be cut; and it superimposes any image of the future – woven within the possibility horizon of technical means – to be aestheticized as a possible scenario. The process of moving all services onto digital platforms does not happen simply because the latter exist; it does not happen because they are convenient for resuming economic activities; because it is a central directive or because the opportunity for material and technical reconstruction will otherwise be lost. All of these are true, yet they are for informational media is the material equivalent of a cyber-capitalism, which, in its derailment, *situates* both threat and compensation.

The Greek case is indicative in that regard. From the first week of work cessation in education, catering and retail stores and services, on 10 March 2020, and until the gradual implementation of the quarantine 15 days later, the Greek state expedited the translocation of all of these onto digital platforms. In just one week, more than 200,000 virtual classrooms were set up to launch distance education, dozens of digital tools for teleworking and online interacting were promoted by the EU,¹⁵ and the informational transformation of public services was substantially accelerated.¹⁶ And every business found itself facing a global shift of the economy into digital environments. Publishing houses, clothing stores, car dealerships, sushi bars, art galleries, fitness services and many more undertook to reorganize their operations. Those who were already working normally *and* through the Internet found themselves in an advantageous position. The rest were faced with asymmetrical competition. Those that did not have a digital counterpart (technical, construction and industrial industries) were suppressed, expecting from the state a safety net and a recovery plan. Some others (repairers, treatment centres and sex workers) were directly confronted with a radical fall into conditions of precarity, and always with the alternative of illegally channelling their labour into black channels. Those who could not connect to the network, let alone when they didn't have a home, experienced ‘social distancing’ in the most radical literal sense. The gap is widening, the shocks are accelerating, economic and social activities are being squeezed in favour of digital networks’ development.

Digital platforms were ready to receive this volume of participation. In fact, they were looking forward to it. All that is required for developing the next generation of smart applications is a constant online presence and, indeed, greater bandwidth. The war

¹⁵ See <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/content/european-digital-strategy>

¹⁶ For an example of a study investigating the reengineering of government processes, see Apeksha Hooda and M.L. Singla (2020).

between the 'Great Powers' and China lies in this very restriction of the spread of the 5G system (at least until the 'West' manages to develop similar technologies and fortify its 'protective policies'). The almost inevitable participation of millions of additional users on the Internet should not go unnoticed. Digital platforms are the infrastructure of an oncoming techno-sociality – "the New Electricity, the privately-owned utilities of our century" – and we need to politicize them "before they disappear into the background" (Lovink, 2019: 25). "We are the product" of the Internet, says Boris Beaudé (2016: 25), analyzing the economy of digital services – open and free for users, but not for service providers and advertising companies. With data-mining, the classification of information and its algorithmic analysis, the subject-user becomes the main producer of primary material for managing political trends (from companies such as Cambridge Analytica and BlueLabs), for the development of 'smart homes' and human engineering (as with the microchip implants of companies such as Biohax and BioTeq), for the creation of even more sophisticated social tools (for Facebook, YouTube, Zoom and other social media). The longer the quarantine lasts, the higher the rate of viral growth of information technologies to the body-social.

Bodies

In the days following the quarantine announcement by the Greek government, it became clear that strict bans would be imposed due to Covid-19. In a generalized struggle to acquire supplies, people focused on what they considered necessary: masks, gloves and antiseptics; pasta, legumes and evaporated milk; computer accessories, board games and fitness equipment; toilet paper and condoms. I found myself, then, with an associate who has been my interlocutor for years, and who trades 'illegal substances'. I stood at a trafficking crossroads of methamphetamine and Moroccan hashish. I wondered about the impact that the ban on 'unnecessary movement' would have on this market, but I already knew that its main channels were primarily invisible; micro-commerce can also be parasitically attached to the six available Movement Permit reasons.¹⁷ The kind of capitalism we are experiencing strongly incorporates the circulation of psychotropic substances. Susan Buck-Morss (1992) informs us that as early as the 19th century, a (chemical) technology of *anaesthetics* was developed, like a responsive link to the shock of the organism, which is achieved with the use of technical means. In 2020, crises are so frequent, the

¹⁷ For a guide to lockdown in Greece, see a brochure published by the Ministry of Citizen Protection here: <https://forma.gov.gr/docs/faq-lockdown-en.pdf>

demands for creative labour so great, the desiring images, the figures of gendered bodies and sexual representations so intense, specialized and magnetic, that stress and pleasure have been translated into biochemical information for personalized needs and desires.

There was no talk of the pandemic with my interlocutor. The riots of December 2008, the debt crisis, and the (in)famous 2015 debt negotiation with the EU had been repeatedly discussed; and the effect that quarantine analysis would have on us was rather embodied knowledge; especially when it was only the second day of its implementation, and every dystopian image of loneliness, isolation and control had been awakened through social media posts. My interlocutor was determined not to get into this game. All he cared about was how he would manage to see a girl he had just met. The distance was great and Athens was full of police blocks. The solution was already there: "I type '4'; I say my girlfriend suffers a panic attack, and I carry a Xanax box with me."¹⁸ The deception is impenetrable. For more independent and perhaps solitary individuals, the dystopia of isolation knocks on the door. Maybe not isolation itself, but feelings of loss, rejection and anticipation become part of a daily balance that 'shows' it will last forever. Grinder – a social networking app for gay men – is still used by the most courageous; and sex work pays double for those willing to take the risk. As Beatriz Perciado (2008: 107) says, "this capitalism is hot, psychotropic and punk".

I wonder when someone breaks the quarantine. I wonder why supposedly 'progressive' political forces have taken to reminding us of our personal responsibility towards public health. I wonder why accredited conservative leaders – obviously out of a need to protect a closed economy – have been promoting the most progressive – or more accurately 'cyberpositive' – politics, rejecting 'social distancing'.¹⁹ My interlocutor's example is by no means rare; and it leads me to an ethical stance – that is, to a question about responsive action – which escapes rules and types. Namely, it is not found in injunctions based on political norms, 'social contracts', idealisms about human or religious fanaticism. Nor does it show naivety or indifference to the dangers of the pandemic. It is the result of a deep need for bodily contact, which on the verge of isolation eventuates in a sobriety concerning the ability to navigate through the flows that assemble the current landscape: between information about the virus and ways of protecting oneself against it;

¹⁸ Number 'four' on the list of movement permits corresponds to the reason "Going to assist people in need/emergency."

¹⁹ For an intriguing epidemiological view that rejects 'social distancing', see <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/2764369>

amidst emotional patterns of anxiety, fear and anger on social media; within the guarded urban space, state guidelines and one's horizon of personal social contacts for selecting the truly necessary.

This is cyberpiracy in a landscape of dense mediation from a new base (or derivative sphere) – that of bioinformatic and techno-social systems. And as an ethical stance, it is already reminiscent of a virus that is spreading through society anyway, commemorating in the historical present all that is cut by technique.

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Notes on Contributors

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