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Hyperreality and Social Distortion amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In the increasingly digitised 21st century characterised by continuous finger tapping, 'likes' and 'shares', media plays an integral role in shaping our understanding and misunderstanding of social reality. While becoming increasingly tangled in this metaphorical online world offering the promise of increased connectivity, our sense of 'reality' has been greatly distorted. Truth has become indistinguishable from counterfeit simulation and the cyberspace strives to become more real than the real world itself. This has only been furthered by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, promoting a greater sense of dependence on the virtual sphere necessitated by social distancing. Having eroded our sense of collectivisation and accessibility to in-person relationships, it has caused people to survive in an atmosphere of social uncertainty. Consequently, this article attempts to bring to the foreground the social distortion that has been engendered by the pandemic, fragmenting the public body into isolated pockets interconnected only through technological simulations of reality.

Keywords: *Hyperreality, COVID-19, simulation, Hyper-subjects, deepfakes.*

In the increasingly digitized age of the 21st century with continuous finger-tapping, 'likes' and 'shares', the media undoubtedly plays an integral role in shaping our fundamental understanding and misunderstanding of daily events. As a result, the highly influential work of Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* continues to resonate in today's age such that "the medium is *still* the message". The medium continues to influence the way in which we absorb and process information while the content of the message is rendered immaterial. Building upon this view, French Sociologist Jean Baudrillard in his work *Simulacra and Simulation* conceived the medium as the principal factor shaping our social reality. He posited that, in modern society, signs and symbols represent the real world but a shift from 'reality' to 'hyperreality' occurs as the representation becomes an increasingly real simulation of the world around us (Nunes 315). This shift has been fostered by the inextricable presence of the internet as a simulation of our world. Although it has greatly promoted

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increased connectivity and reduced the world to a global village, it has essentially created a metaphorical world for conducting our lives. However, the greater the possibilities of this new world, the more problematic the idea of the ‘world’ itself becomes. With businesses scuffling to “open shops” on the internet and making it a “place” for earning profits, the metaphorical cyberspace offered by the internet has become more important than a mere simulation of the real world, inevitably becoming ‘more real than the real’ itself. This undermining of the distance between the virtual and the real has been furthered by the coronavirus pandemic imposing social restrictions and making the internet the only medium of total connectivity. Thus, in consonance with Jean Baudrillard’s theory on hyperreality, this paper argues that social distancing necessitated by COVID-19 has caused people to survive in isolated pockets of hyper subjectivity greatly furthering social distortion in the 21st century.

COVID-19 as a social phenomenon is an arguable product of hyperreality. However, an application of Baudrillardian hyperreality does not imply that the pandemic is ‘unreal’, instead its very presence has altered our salient landscape and conspicuously upended our lives. In its early stages, it presented itself as the seemingly largest social experiment ever conducted on a global scale with a significant proportion of the world population confined by lockdowns, a dramatic shift to e-commerce, and live human interactions being replaced by internet pixels and online platforms like Zoom. As the notion of self-quarantine began, the disease was only known to most people by word-of-mouth, online articles, images, and news portals without physically experiencing it or knowing anyone who had thitherto contracted it. Thus, COVID-19 entered our consciousness as a hyperreality through an online production of its indication before it actually became present in our physical reality (when people around us started falling ill). However, soon enough there began a reproduction of its presence with repeated reinforcement of washing hands, social distancing, wearing masks, sanitization that emerged as novel concepts acquiring salience. McLuhan asserted that new technological innovations accompanying social changes cause a change in the form of media. For instance, the internet includes print, radio, and TV and is in turn encapsulated as an “omnipresent media” within mobile devices (Nunes 320). Since mobiles became the most feasible means of accessing the world, they lowered the cost of participating in hyperreality. Thus, with home quarantining and social distancing, the use of such devices has further increased as people engage in sending memes and tweets to parrot the presence of COVID-19, consequently having a significant hand in creating ‘meaning’ amidst the pandemic. Thus, the coronavirus pandemic is not only a product of hyperreality but an event furthering hyperreality.

As the pandemic furthers hyperreality encouraging a socially distant public body interconnected only through technological simulations of reality like videos and chats, our navigation of this information-saturated world causes us to become “hypersubjective”. This means that our understanding of media and its meaning is highly ambiguous due to the dismantling of a singular ethnocultural boundary into a mixed global context. According to Baudrillard, hypersubjectivity had also emerged previously with the advent of the internet but it was different as there was still a sense of collectivization and shared physical basis that helped place individuals in a common context (Finn and Palis 785). However, social distancing has eroded this reliance on collectivisation by promoting dependence on a personal basis of absorbing information which is extremely fragmenting. For example, it has greatly altered the accessibility of relationships that are outdoor and mass-driven like sports events, cinema halls, live music concerts or simply meeting people for dinner and get-togethers. Although it can be argued that social media has maintained some personal relationships through video calls and online meetings, the communication through these means is extremely abstract as compared to in-person contact. Thus, in-person access is pushed to the periphery with the absence of people to reinforce certain common behaviours. This loss of a shared meaning of physical reality became prominent when there was a widespread disagreement on the nature of problems causing COVID-19 in April 2020 with some people believing its origin to be primarily political, economic, or an international issue of contention while others believed it to be purely biological (Rothman and Fowler 7). This causes the fragmentation of the social body, with increased atomization of people as ‘hypersubjects’ who are left to survive in an atmosphere of social uncertainty devoid of a common understanding of acceptable behaviour in the pandemic.

Baudrillard had cautioned against such an atmosphere of hypersubjectivity where individuals are left to navigate the hyper-informed society such that the “truth becomes indistinguishable from its counterfeit simulation” as is evident through the pervasive ‘disinformation’ and ‘fake news’ that accompanied the pandemic (Langman 6). Since there is too much content online with innumerable viewing options, it entices people separated by social distancing to consume as much content as possible guided either by algorithms, celebrities, or friends. Due to this high engagement, all real-life events essentially become media events as was visible in the early 2010s when Twitter helped in unleashing the Arab Spring. Similarly, COVID-19 is invisible, quite literally as the virus passes among us imperceptibly, but also figuratively as it is discussed only in terms of the number of deaths, cases, and positive or negative test percentages. This has promoted its “illusory” nature by separating the on-ground horror of the disease from the

discourse circulated virtually. As a result, the circulation of posts and videos exposing the pandemic as a “hoax” has proliferated including the use of “deepfakes” that can manipulate audio and visual content to create deceptively “real” media (Langman 8). In fact, this has become responsible for the development of factions of “anti-maskers” and “anti-vaxxers” protesting against social distancing norms by masquerading their belief as a ‘fact’ and basing their reality on the ‘illusion’ that they cherry-picked. However, cherry-picking does not mean that we have control over our reality. It surely creates the illusion that we have the choice to click on a link, to share a particular tweet, and thus assert our individuality. But in reality, our choice merely functions under the guise of a predictive algorithm that determines the trends that influence our decisions (a seemingly innocuous advertisement on a website that affected our shopping decisions the next day) and most importantly monetize our choices. Thus, while the internet causes us to believe that our data and choices are unique and makes us revel in our individuality, countless other people make the same decisions effectively replacing the “randomness of crowds with the illusion of mass persuasion” (Langman 12). Therefore, as the pandemic forces us to survive in isolated pockets, our biases are fed and shaped by innumerable sources effectively simulating different versions of ‘truth’ for everyone including anti-maskers, abiding citizens, conspiracy believers, and so on, greatly fragmenting the social narrative.

While deepfakes and pandemic-related misinformation exist, it can be argued that social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Google have effectively combated their spread by incorporating a network of fact-checkers and researchers to remove such posts misleading the public. However, through an examination of 225 samples of misinformation, by the University of Oxford’s Reuters Institute, posted between January and March 2021, it was revealed that while more than half of the content was labelled with warnings or deleted, significant volumes persisted in circulation (Maréchal and MacKinnon 15). The organisations even reported being overwhelmed by the explosion of COVID-related misinformation which was exacerbated by a lack of human workers as they had to switch to algorithm-based content moderation following quarantine protocols. The ineffectiveness was further foregrounded in March 2021 by Journalist Kaveh Waddell as a part of *Consumer Reports* investigation by creating an advertisement stating COVID-19 is a hoax – “Don’t give in to propaganda, just live your life,” which was approved by Facebook. Since platforms like Facebook do not disclose the detailed procedure involved in reviewing posts, their opacity and unaccountable mechanism end up publicizing contradictory information even during times of crisis like a global pandemic. Thus, content moderation ends up being a downstream effort by such platforms to “clean the mess caused upstream by their own systems designed for targeting audience

and automated amplification” (Maréchal and MacKinnon 17). As a result, such platforms become an indispensable part of the hyperreal setup with the automated content algorithm targeting people who are most vulnerable to a particular type of information. For, instance while anti-lockdown protestors might view themselves as a part of a spontaneous movement with each participant driven by different motives like economic uncertainty, unemployment, dread of government overreach, in actuality the protest is a result of coordinated messaging and amplification by Facebook and other social media pages radiating misinformation to the vulnerable masses often supported by organisations with deep pockets. While it is impossible to ban such content altogether, efforts should be undertaken to enforce reforms in accordance with human rights principles and curb the unchecked power of algorithms. A system of ‘adversarial fact-checking’ can be employed where individuals harbouring diverse and even conflicting socio-political views collectively analyse the content in order to avoid the pretense of objectivity and truly keep their personal biases at bay.

Thus, it cannot be denied that the Baudrillardian theory of simulation and hyperreality is more relevant today than ever before with the pandemic having created a situation of “over proximity” to cyberspace. Society is jubilantly receding from favouring reality to living in the virtual world – the hyperreal sphere. Politics has been reduced to mere entertainment and social media has become yet another way to influence and control the masses. Our reality is no longer the economic impact of our day’s productivity or the socio-economic background of the homeless person we encounter on our way to work, but is instead the number of likes we garner on social media and the event that is trending online no matter how insignificant or ‘unreal’ it may actually be. Consequently, we no longer have a grasp on objective material truth and align our reality according to the impact that it has on our immediate personal happiness and well-being superseding any form of prolonged informational honesty. As a result, it is likely that our fragmentation into increasingly isolated pockets will only accelerate further till we enter the level of hyperreality where the physical and the virtual worlds converge, such that it becomes impossible to distinguish between the two. However, at such a stage social distortion would be insignificant since people would derive equal value and meaning, if not more, from the simulated world. For example, virtual influencers and AI-powered models exist just like any other ‘real’ human being with millions of followers on social media platforms. As a result, a convergence of the two worlds might result in the simulation of reality without origin where the internet might stop bearing any relation to reality whatsoever. After all, as rightly quoted by Marshall McLuhan – “We shape our tools, and then our tools shape us.”
