Appropriate/Inappropriate: How People Behave Online in Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This article discusses how Covid-19 can be categorised as a state of exception, which then changes people's tendency to interact online and how they do it during this pandemic. Interacting online closely relates to people's perceptions of 'being in the world' and how people behave online, i.e. what is considered appropriate and what is considered inappropriate on their 'online interaction'. Using literature review by reading provided materials regarding the topic and drawing some information from our personal experience during the pandemic as additional data, we argue that that Covid-19 announced by WHO as a pandemic is a crisis which caused several countries to declare a 'state of exception'. Thus, policies such as physical distancing change people's tendency to interact, from physical *in situ* to 'going online'. People that use various media platforms for interaction can be discussed using the concept of 'polymedia', a way of using lots of media interchangeably by considering which one is more appropriate (and inappropriate) for particular situations during the pandemic. It is because polymedia has its own moral dimensions, and it has a relation to how people behave online that is also closely related to the concept of 'ordinary ethics' on their quotidian online interaction.

Keywords: state of emergency, state of exception, polymedia, digital, ordinary ethics

Pandemic, State of Emergency, and … Going Online? – An Introduction.
In the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, almost all countries encourage physical distancing to break the transmission of the Corona Virus. Physical distancing, by some countries, is formulated into several regulations, such as limiting activities in public places and lockdowns. As a result, many people have to carry out their activities at home for more months, such as working and studying from home. Based on our observation, being 'locked up' makes people spend more time with 'digital media', for instance, taking online classes, interacting with friends or relatives, and scrolling social media feeds. Inspired by this phenomenon, this article will discuss how Covid-19 can be categorised as a state of exception, namely an 'unusual event' which then changes people's tendency to interact online and how they do it during this pandemic. Interacting online will be closely related to people's perceptions of 'being in the world' and how people behave online, i.e. what is considered appropriate and what is considered inappropriate on their 'online interaction'.

This, then bring us to several questions: how can behaviour be regulated without being the product obedience to rules? This is the starting point where Bourdieu (1977) comes up with the idea of habitus, the product of history, producing individual and collective practices that organize us all. To understand how habitus works, we should shift our sights from looking at opus operatum (the product, e.g. knowing how to act) to modus operandi (the process, e.g. how to act properly). Habitus that engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions of human-being embodies in our body since it is related to the process of objectification. We learn things and we perceive structural objects (for instance) with our body, making our body as a memory i.e. mnemonic that store the habitus which according to Bourdieu, we adjust habitus depending on our position in the world.

To elaborate this issue, bringing the idea of embodiment as a paradigm of anthropology, Csordas (1990) comes with the concept of habitus from Bourdieu and perception (preobjective) from Marleau-Ponty to explain ritual healing (including glossolalia and prophecy) in Charismatic Christianity community. He argues that body is a productive starting point for analysing culture and self. The perception (preobjective) and practice (habitus) grounded in the body. The selves (as a cultural object) are constituted or objectified not only in the process of child socialisation but continue through our adult cultural life.

This 'continuous ongoing process of socialiation' relates to the concept of dasein (being there) from Heidegger and Patocka. Trnka (2020) elaborates this further with the idea of traversing, the embodied practice of the ways of seeing, experiencing, and moving through the world and the kinds of persons we become through them. She

claims that being there is not only exist in the world but also dwell within it and be among others as a corporeal subject moving through space and time.

If we take this traversing idea, further questions then arise: does going online include? Moreover, in the first place, is something digital, or everything in cyberspace is 'not real'? This question was raised by Boellstorff (2016) by bringing the idea of digital real, which is an important effort in anthropological theory related to 'ontological turns'. Boellstorff (2016) refutes statements that often clash the 'digital' and the 'real'. As if the opposite of 'digital' is 'real'. However, in fact, the opposition from the 'real' is the 'unreal', while the opposition from 'digital' is 'physical'. So, there are digital things that are real (he calls it 'digital real') and there are also 'digital unreal' as many physical things are real and unreal. Boellstorf pointed out that 'going online' in virtual world is a 'real place' in their own sense.

From anthropological and ethnographic perspectives, these 'online' and 'offline' issues are even discussed from methodological point of view. One of the good examples is the question that can anthropologist or ethnographer conduct research online? Or where is actually 'the field' if we would like to research online phenomena? Bonilla and Rosa (2015) bring the idea of 'hashtag ethnography' by examining how protest (activism) can be done digitally. Through their writings, they explain how and why social media platforms (through hashtags) can become powerful sites that document a number of events, such as police brutality and misrepresentation of bodies in mainstream media. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) argue that hashtags can become 'field sites' for doing ethnography. With a hashtag, ethnographers can track texts that discuss specific information to be examined. Here, we see how the hashtag becomes 'the real place' as Boellstorf (2016) discussed.

It is NOT an Ethnography, Isn't? – Methods
We used literature review in this research, by reading provided materials regarding the topic. Also, we drew some information from our personal experience as additional data. Covid-19 is a very unique phenomenon since it put us in a 'weird' situation, a brand-new emergency state for humankind in the 21st century. Since this is unique situation we experienced, it is worth to try this kind of method. Some might say this is an autoethnography, a concept of researching our own self using ethnographic methods. However, we have to say that this is not really into that kind of direction because it needs lots of time, and this is just a 'mini research' – not the deep and intensive one – so claiming this as a form of ethnography is too pompous.

Crisis, Polymedia, and Ordinary Ethics – Result and Discussion

1. At first, How Covid-19 Becomes a 'Crisis'?

How does anthropology explain a situation where an 'unusual event' (like this pandemic) occurs in a state? When and in what ways can be an event is categorised as a 'state of exception' or 'state of emergency'? In her writings about anti-crisis, Roitman (2013) stated that the definition of crisis was 'problematic'. Who has an authority to determine a situation that is considered as a crisis? This question is important because it is not only a 'blind spot' in the construction of social science narratives and how we produce history but also the concept of crisis becomes the reason and foundation of a country to announce a state of exception or emergency.

One of many, Fassin and Vasquez (2005) explain that natural disasters can cause a country to declare a state of emergency or an exceptional situation. They bring the idea of 'humanitarian state of exception', which is a state of emergency announced by the government not only because there is a risk or threat, but also as a form of sympathy to the victims (so that they feel the government empathises by paying attention to them) and so that humanitarian aid can be distributed more efficiently. In line with Fassin and Vasquez (2005) who considered emergencies sometimes political, Beckett (2013) brought the idea of politics of emergency, when emergencies that seemingly structureless were used to produce, reproduce, or transformed certain power. Therefore, an emergency can be justified by a country (or another country) to do 'whatever' the country wants by reason 'to solve the problem', including intervening other countries.

Is the state of emergency always a response of a situation that only happens once e.g. natural disaster? No, it is not. In a collaborative project initiated by Das and Poole (2004), we see the relationship between state and its margins on a comparison ethnographic about the state of emergency considering the margins of the state. The concept of margins here refers to many things, from marginal people to geographic and political boundaries. These margins can be a reason for a country to implement emergency of power not only once but could be every day. This is closely related to the sovereignty which not only concerns matter across national borders, but over life and death. We can also see how politics in an emergency is related to what Mbembe (2003) wrote about necropolitics, how someone determines others as 'killable' for various reasons (e.g. law), making this practice as a 'management' of life.

Using the concept of necropolitics (and discussing it with Foucauldian concept of biopower), Mbembe (2003) argues that the ultimate sovereignty is when you have power control other people's live, including dictating who may live and who must die.

He believes that necropolitics, a theory of how the power of live over the body is subjugated by the power of death (necropower), making people live 'in between' condition of life and death. He gave example, such as the right to enslave other people, Palestinian occupation, and self-righteous suicidal bombing. In brief, necropolitics is a view of justifying violence and killing upon each other.

After these theoretical arguments, can we categorise the current situation as a 'crisis' since some countries declare this pandemic as the 'state of exception'? We would argue that what we are facing right now is a form of crisis, not only because in various mainstream media this pandemic is called a crisis, but also because this phenomenon will be remembered as a historical 'event' of this century. Roitman (2013:2) believes that crisis could be a marker or a signifier of a fact or event that we call history. Thus, when the world announces that this pandemic is an 'important event' in our history, we can understand that this event is a 'crisis'. Therefore, when the whole world regards this pandemic as a crisis, then we consider every policy implemented by the state responding to this crisis could be seen as a form of 'state of exception'.

2. Going Online – You are There, but You are Not!

The instruction of physical distancing is implemented by some countries into a number of policies such as limiting mass interactions or even lockdown. People then keep interacting through 'digital world' both because they are forced to work or study from home and because they need to interact with other humans as homo socius.

For some people, this change of interaction from 'physical' to 'digital' certainly has a significant influence. Interaction must be done 'online', such as via Zoom, WhatsApp or other real-time video applications, for example, meetings with colleagues, class seminars, or 'hanging out' with friends. The phenomenon of the 'absence of the body' can be discussed with the concept of 'being there'. It will be very different when we are present physically in a room with other people (with all sensations captured by the senses about that room), rather than just seeing them through a 'virtual screen'. That is because being 'there' is a matter of knowing the world through movements, experiencing, and perception (Trnka 2020:3).

Besides, Trnka (2020) also explains that our physical body cannot 'exist' in a virtual environment and conducting real-time video conferencing cannot replace our physical presence in situ. The essence of the discussion, the talks, the ideas, and the stories shared in the online seminar will be the same if all of them are delivered directly in 'physical circumstances', but that will not be able to replace the experience of being in a place with all conscious and unconscious knowledge we get (2020:3). In brief, we were technically there, but we were not.

3. Polymedia in the 'Crisis'

With these 'limitations', it cannot be denied that there is no other way than to use 'online media' to communicate amid this crisis – after all, this is the 'state of exception', where everything can be 'negotiated'. People are not asked to come to the office nor to campus. Neither do they hang out physically with their friends nor families. Instead, they communicate through the 'screen'. With the development of digital technology, we now have access to a dozen different media. This is interesting because in the process of 'virtual' interaction, people tend to use media differently, not just fixing on one medium as what people had in the past when long-distance communication was still in the form of telephones or even letters (Madinou and Miller 2012:174).

How do we explain this phenomenon? Madinaou and Miller (2012) suggest a new concept called 'polymedia', which is a new 'name' that can be used by scholars that refer to digital technology, social media, and other virtual media. This is important because scholars are sometimes confused when using concepts related to digital communication technology. For example, how do we name applications such as Zoom that combine audio,video, and texts (chat)? Or, how do the scholars explain the phenomenon when someone prefers to use Zoom when having meetings or seminars, then switches to WhatsApp video call when they want to contact their best friend or their spouse? Are terms like 'multi-platform', 'multi-channel', 'multimedia', or 'media ecology' suitable for that?

We would argue that polymedia is the right concept to explain this phenomenon, namely when people use different media interchangeably, ranging from email, instant messengers, audio calling, real-time video calling, social media, and so on for different situations in order to manage their emotions and relationships. Also, Madinaou and Miller (2012:173) even argue that this concept can explain the emotional, social, and moral consequences of how people use different media for different situations to manage their emotions and relationships.

The concept of polymedia is very important because we need a 'name' for explaining this new situation since in the near future, a new form of media (with more sophisticated features) may emerge and it is possible that the 'real digital' discussed by Boellstorff becomes difficult to be distinguished from 'physical real'. In addition, Polymedia has various dimensions, one of which relates to moral responsibility, which is a normative value regarding how people should behave online. Moreover, we can understand one's personal connection with others by seeing how that person uses certain digital media with someone, and at different times, using other media platforms for different people. For example, which media are more suitable for office or campus

affairs (considered as more 'formal'), and which media are more ideal for friendship and family (considered as more 'informal') (Madinaou and Miller 2012:173).

4. Moral Dimension of Polymedia – an Ordinary Ethics?

Speaking about moral responsibility through 'online' media, Gershon (2010) discusses how people understand the different media (ideologies), and how they use it (idioms of practice). Gershon argues that it is crucial to determine people's media ideologies before understanding the way they communicate through technologies (polymedia, if we use the term proposed by Bonilla and Rosa). It is important to know what 'structure' of particular

medium matters and when those 'structure' matters. For example, which is more appropriate, ending a relationship via email, instant messenger, or by telephone?

One of the reasons why the concept of polymedia is pivotal here because of its various dimensions, ranging from remediation to moral responsibility (Madinaou and Miller 2012). The one that I would like to highlight here is the dimension of moral responsibility. Then, why online meetings in the context of university stuff or office should be done in real-time video calling via Zoom rather than via WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, or Instagram Live? For more understanding the question, we will give an example from our own experience. The first author of this article is a husband who was separated by distance from his wife. The wife was in Indonesia while lockdown and closed border policies made him could not come home (he was in New Zealand). He, then, rather ask himself, in doing their daily interaction, why do they prefer WhatsApp as a medium of communication over email? Apart from the different features that each application has, there are other things that they need to pay attention to, namely the moral dimension of polymedia. Madinaou and Miller explain this moral dimension as how 'some media are considered morally more appropriate than others' which is normative value regarding how people should behave online (2012:180).

The moral dimensions of polymedia discussed by Madinaou and Miller above are in line with what was discussed by Das (2012) regarding ordinary ethics. For Das, normative rules of a particular society give people the guidelines of how to act ethically (2012:134). I would argue that this also applies in the case of online interaction. In a 'crisis' situation like this when all university obligations must be resolved from home, with the sophisticated technology that we have, a student could possibly call their supervisor/lecturer anytime for asking about their assignments. However, does that make the student instantly make a video call via WhatsApp during dawn or midnight without sending permission? This act is certainly considered 'inappropriate', i.e. 'unethical'.

Moreover, Das argues that ethics can be traced by looking at the one's habit (2012). Ethics can even be found in quotidian things, including how we should behave online. Today, in the middle of these difficult days, people tend to be more sensitive. Therefore, in this context, we need to pay attention to how to maintain our lives together with others,

including the way we choose media to interact and the language that we use. It is because, sometimes, unconsciously, there is something that ruins our lives together just because it is considered trivial, but for some people, it could affect their lives.

So … A Conclusion?

I would like to argue that Covid-19 announced by WHO as a pandemic could be categorised as a crisis which caused several countries to declare a 'state of exception', making this phenomenon an 'unusual event' (Roitman 2013). Policies such as physical distancing then change people's tendency to interact, from physical to online, although these virtual interactions cannot replace the physical presence in situ (Trnka, 2020).

The use of various media platforms for interaction can be discussed using the concept of polymedia proposed by Madianou and Miller (2012), namely how people use various media interchangeably and which media are considered more appropriate for particular situations during the pandemic. That is because polymedia has its own moral dimensions and it has a relation to how people behave online. This is also closely related to what was proposed by Das (2012) as 'ordinary ethics', namely which one is considered appropriate, and which one is inappropriate on their quotidian online interaction.

Acknowledgement

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