Bored Media, Virality and #Lockdownlife

If metaphors of contagion and virality have long been marshalled by social media corporations as part of their ongoing "war on boredom," in the context of the current coronavirus pandemic, this virality is—as Tony Sampson and Jussi Parikka have suggested— now 'resolutely non-metaphorical' (2020). One concrete illustration of this can be seen in the massive outpouring of advice that was issued in the days and weeks following the imposition of lockdown measures, concerning how people could "beat" the boredom that was—or was feared to be—inevitable in this context. The examples here are numerous, encompassing content produced by an exceptionally diverse range of cultural and media establishments,[1] as well as official UK government advice documents, and council-led initiatives.[2] The emerging effort to contain the very real COVID-19 virus was thus underwritten by a ramping up of the metaphorical war on boredom, as governments, cultural organisations, and media outlets everywhere began to issue advice documents, tool kits, watch lists, and recommendations for how to cope with boredom during lockdown.

Many of the messages produced in this context strangely echo the structure, tone, and content of bingeable media sites such as *Bored Panda*, *Boredom Therapy, Tumblr,* or the 'What to do When You're Bored' subgenre of teen-produced YouTube tutorials, in their determination to shield those shielding from the putative ill effects of boredom. Couched as they are in the

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[1] For example: The National Archives' new 'Boredom busters' micro-site; *Art Rabbit*'s roundup of 'boredom-banishing' virtual art exhibitions to visit during lockdown; *Time Out*—temporarily re-branded as *Time In*— *London's* '101 things to do…when you're bored at home': an 'epic list of streaming culture, movies, podcasts, games, workouts and learning' to help combat feelings of boredom when self-isolating; the *BBC Online*'s 'isolation inspiration' list of 'TV, films and books to binge in lockdown this weekend'.

[2] Examples here include: Public Health England's 'Guidance for the public on the mental health and wellbeing aspects of coronavirus [COVID-19]', which acknowledges boredom as a real and present danger of the lockdown, prescribing a range of online and physical activities to combat the threat; Hartlepool Borough Council's 'COVID-19 Boredom Pack', which contains links to social media content on Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram, amongst other activities to keep busy during self-inspiration; Council-led community aid groups across the UK have also set up initiatives to help combat the threat of boredom in the context of lockdown.

reassuringly familiar language of personalised viewing recommendations and listicles, these 'What to do when you're bored in quarantine' communications have played an important role in helping to smooth the transition to lockdown life, by modelling the most constructive ways for people to remain entertained while isolating at home. The historic moment of lockdown has thus been pre-mediated by the viral logic of a recommendations-driven, entertainment-on-demand culture that has been prescribing bingeable media as an antidote to boredom for years. However, this imperative to contain boredom takes on a new complexion in the context of a global health pandemic, where there is a very real need to incentivise a population that is being asked to stay at home for weeks, or even months, on end. As the lockdown measures have progressed, media reports have routinely cast boredom as a major motivation for mass flouting of the quarantine[3], with some speculating about whether 'lockdown boredom' might eventually 'lead to a dreaded second wave' (Mahdawi 2020). Boredom management is thus framed in this context as an issue not only of mental wellbeing, but of public health and the public good. At stake here, in other words, is a curious re-framing of good citizenship in the context of COVID-19 as a preparedness to #stayhome, lie back, and "binge watch for Britain" in order to keep boredom at bay.

What the lockdown has thus exposed and intensified is the pivotal role that boredom plays in the wider policing, management, and control of bodies and minds in an age of what Byung-Chul Han calls 'digital psychopolitics' (Han 2017). One distinguishing feature of this psychopolitical regime, Han maintains, is that discipline is no longer limited to physical prohibitions and bodily restrictions. Rather, power has now thoroughly penetrated the inner layers of subjects, who have interiorised the neoliberal demand to constantly manage and optimise their own emotions and mental states (28). This psycho-power is secured through an

[3] See, for example, Chao-Fong (2020), Doughty (2020), Mahdawi (2020) and ITV News (2020).

incitement to limitless pleasure through digital consumption, and is underwritten by an ethos of positivity and freedom from constraints of any kind (p. 1).

In the context of COVID-19, this limitless freedom and positivity has been brought into jarring contrast with the newfound restrictions and negativities of #lockdownlife. Social media platforms such as TikTok have thrived in this moment in part, I suggest, because they offer a means of working through key tensions: tensions between the physical constraints of lockdown, and neoliberalism's promotion of limitless freedom as a freedom to engage in media production and consumption. As one brief example, the #boredinthehouse meme that went viral on TikTok and other platforms during lockdown works through these tensions quite openly, by showing how boredom could be optimised and worked through the viral flows of networked media. Originating in a [TikTok](#) video uploaded on 4 March 2020, in which Curtis Roach drums on a table and snaps his fingers while rapping 'Ok, so I'm bored in the house and I'm in the house bored', the song has been described as 'the perfect anthem for the lockdown' (Arnold 2020). Hundreds of thousands of videos featuring the #boredinthehouse hashtag and song have been made since the original post; while there are a number of [variations on the theme](#), a common denominator is that they picture people, [mostly in domestic settings](#), poking fun at what it feels like to be bored during quarantine. What TikTok produces through these videos is a means of releasing the stuckness and stasis of boredom into the rhythms and flows of contagious [mimetic participation](#). In doing so, the platform also contributes to the global effort to contain COVID-19 by modelling examples of what idealised #stayhome citizenship looks like.

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