



Social Media and Coronavirus: Paranoid-Schizoid Technology and Pandemic?

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Abstract

This article draws on the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's 'paranoid-schizoid position' to discuss some exemplary social media posts about the coronavirus. I argue that posts often express experiences, thoughts, and fantasies in a schematic manner. They reproduce a paranoid-schizoid logic by which particular views on the current crisis are articulated and different ones are negated. The Kleinian framework is supplemented with Lacan's notion of the Discourse of the Hysteric. I argue that the examples discussed in this article are instances of hysteric modes of relating to an Other (e.g. the expert) that is allegedly withholding important information from the subject. Splitting is amplified by the technological functioning of social media themselves which split users along a paranoid-schizoid dynamic for purposes of surveillance, advertising and profit maximization. I conclude by outlining steps towards the Kleinian 'depressive position' both in relation to how we engage with COVID-19 and social media. The depressive position acknowledges both good and bad aspects of a given situation. I further show how it can be supplemented via the Lacanian Discourse of the Analyst which includes a commitment to the limits of knowledge, certainty, and prediction.

Keywords Coronavirus · Social media · Psychoanalysis · Klein · Lacan

Introduction

Like many other topics talked about on the internet today the novel coronavirus has been picked up by users who discuss it on social media. The coronavirus pandemic also quickly became an infodemic. Many of those social media discussions include the spreading of exaggerated claims, fake news, and conspiracy theories in relation to COVID-19 (Zarocostas 2020). An epidemic of misinformation, inaccuracies, and panic. It is not just fake news, but the sheer amount of information that we are provided with on a daily, minute-by-minute basis on newspaper websites and social media is staggering. It might be harmful and beneficial for us at the same time. Users post, share, and like constantly, and unsurprisingly, all

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we seem to talk about is the virus. In fact, talking about anything else seems strange, inappropriate, or out of touch. This was particularly the case as the first wave of Covid hit many parts of the world in the spring of 2020. At the time of writing this article, many countries are in the midst of a second wave and the virus has continued to dominate subjects' lives. Reflecting about our times of a global health crisis, it struck me what we post on social media and that our posts not only reveal something fundamental about our psyches (are we calm, scared, in denial, disavowing reality, blaming someone, or hopeful) but about social media themselves. Some have said that the coronavirus has brought out the best in many of us online and that social media are now truly social: we talk to each other, post encouraging messages, send hope, but also give each other strength in times of catastrophe and death everywhere. At the same time, there is so much uncertainty and the unknown: When will this be over? What will the world look like afterwards? In her reflections on the pandemic, the psychoanalyst Jill Gentile (2020) has argued that even before Covid, we were living in strange times, times that were marked by rising right-wing populism and an unfolding climate emergency. Two apparent fundamental pillars of (Western) civilization—democracy and nature itself—had been taken for granted by many and were starting to crumble. As Gentile points out, this act of taking our world and its wider social structures for granted may in itself have been an act of fantasy. In the light of climate change, the election of Donald Trump, and the Brexit vote in the UK, such a fantasy of stability and harmony, could no longer be sustained. 'In short, for many of us, reliable psychic defenses against knowing too much, or too well, have grown increasingly feeble. Life is getting weirder, less coherent, more disturbing.' (Gentile 2020, p. 651). Then came Covid. For many, life was getting even more feeble.

Many wonder what the world is going to look like after the coronavirus pandemic has ended, or if our world is going to change in particular ways and that we may lose loved ones, old habits, secure jobs, or in fact parts of ourselves to the virus. Letting go of the old or routine ways of living has felt like a sharp cut through all our lives. We are being told that it is now or never: stay at home, do not go out, and flatten the curve. All or nothing. Even as lockdown measures were eased, and then reintroduced in many countries, we are reminded to constantly stay alert, vigilant, and not to take any unnecessary risks.

'Essentially: coronavirus has ruined communication forever, and, intellectually, Britain will never return to a time before it. We are two weeks in.', Golby (2020, online) claimed with some irony in a column for *the Guardian* published at the beginning of the lockdown in Britain. This has been a claim I have seen repeated time and time again: the world will never be the same again—but will it?

Gentile has similarly argued that subjects are now joined in Real time in the Lacanian sense (Lacan 1974, 1993). The Real for Lacan refers to the traumatic core at the heart of the subject that can never be fully known and symbolized. It is outside of reality but can enter reality in the form of traumatic or raw, unmediated experiences. Covid constitutes a universal intervention of the Real that 'affords us an opportunity to experience a long-deferred breakdown that makes it possible in the now shared space to experience what has not yet been experienced.' (Gentile 2020, p. 657). Covid may afford us a potential to share a universal traumatic core, but individuals may have already encountered the Real in different forms that to them is similar or worse than the Real of Covid. We should be careful not to render the current pandemic as completely unprecedented, novel, or overshadowing. The Real has always been there.

In this short article, I want to argue that the world in its current state seems split, divided along harsh, brutal and clear lines, boundaries, and borders: the healthy and unhealthy, the young and the old, the vulnerable and non-vulnerable, the recovered and those still at risk,

and the dead and the living. Such splits are mirrored and amplified by social media which, as I show, depend on splitting mechanisms themselves.

As we self-isolate, quarantine, practice social distancing, and seem so far apart, we move closer on a virtual level through Zoom, Skype, Facetime, or social media chats, meetings, conferences, and parties. We feel, as Sherry Turkle diagnosed about our contemporary technoculture some time ago, truly *alone together* in such times (Turkle 2011). In her 2011 book, Turkle argued, based on many interviews with teenagers and young people, that they had become dependent on technology in order to be in constant contact with the world and their peers. Technology facilitates a sense of connection for many, while at the same time they feel alienated, isolated, and lonely. Many people are not only anxious about being alone, but also about how to present themselves online so that they seem most likeable and desirable by others. Balick (2014), Singh (2019) and Johanssen (2019) have similarly argued that social media are so attractive because they offer relational opportunities for connection and recognition of the individual subject. Such themes have also been explored by clinicians from different perspectives (Russell 2015; Lemma 2017). The positive sense of coming together via technology is surely present in our current times. However, there are also distances, division, or separation that seem to have come upon us. Kleinian object-relations and Lacanian psychoanalysis can help us analyse them from a conceptual perspective.

Klein: The Paranoid-Schizoid Position

I want to specifically think about particular psychodynamics which I see emerging as patterns across many social media posts but also our experience of the current crisis in general. Those dynamics can be explained through the object-relations psychoanalyst Melanie Klein and her concept of the *paranoid-schizoid position*. I argue that those dynamics are both expressions of our inner worlds and that they are immanent to current social media interfaces and infrastructures.

The paranoid-schizoid position (Klein 1988a, b) can help to further analyse such mechanisms. I do not mean to negate the kinds of posts that I am describing, but to offer a particular form of (hesitant) critique and how we may move beyond them. For Klein, the paranoid-schizoid position refers to a universal developmental stage in the infant's life. According to her, children from birth up to 3 to 6 months of age split the world and themselves into binaries, most fundamentally into a binary of bad and good. In this stage of development, splitting is necessary because it protects the good parts (or objects) from the bad. The main anxiety the infant feels is paranoia. Life itself feels under threat. Everything that is disliked is experienced as persecutory. The paranoid-schizoid position also means that everything good is idealized and regarded with love and affection.

The infant is deeply vulnerable and dependent on the adequate care and love by others. For Klein, the paranoid-schizoid position is a defence mechanism against an existential feeling of threat that the infant may face but also against experiences of early frustration, anxiety, or trauma. It is used as an unconscious way to make sense of the world and may often persist, or momentarily re-emerge, in adult life. 'Paranoid-schizoid mechanisms and relationships may be used in any situation where life and death anxieties abound.' (Segal 2004, p. 35). Klein believed that all infants go through the paranoid-schizoid position and have an unconscious fear of death from the moment they are born (Allen and Ruti 2019, p. 2). While the paranoid-schizoid position may be momentary, the infant introjects both good and bad elements (Klein discusses this in relation to what she calls the 'good' and

‘bad’ breast of the mother which the infant comes to experience as either nurturing or destructive).

In a sense, we live in paranoid-schizoid times where the world seems to be overshadowed by death and the population is itself split: those who have the virus and those who do not (yet or anymore). Such splits are particularly amplified by social media dynamics, as I discuss in the next sections. The type of posts would then only seem as natural responses to a world that has itself turned into a schema of healthy and unhealthy, before and after, and good and bad.

Splits have also expressed themselves in discussions about herd immunity on social media and whether it was or was not government planning to pursue herd immunity in Britain at the expense of letting hundreds of thousands of people die. They also expressed themselves in discussions of the breaking of lockdown rules by the UK PM’s adviser Dominic Cummings. Many British people felt that double standards existed and those in power could get away with breaking the rules or were exempt from them altogether. ‘In general, the anxieties in the paranoid-schizoid position are life and death anxieties: you or me; my life or yours.’ (Segal 2004, p. 36). Such anxieties also express themselves in panic buying and stockpiling of toilet paper and other ‘essential’ goods. Many individuals seem to have become (or always were) egotistical, only thinking about themselves or their families. Some have argued that the state itself has become paranoid and works with a worst-case scenario in order to be fully prepared. Such a form of institutionalized, paranoid anxiety, which is both embodied by the state and many citizens, is probably necessary to some degree, but it similarly operates with a binary vision that only sees an escalating crisis. At the same time, the state can never be fully prepared for a health crisis that is still partially unknowable. It has also been fundamentally *unprepared*, as the USA and UK show for example, where decades of neoliberalism have wrecked healthcare systems (Giroux 2017). The virus has exposed a fundamental vulnerability of many who are dependent on governments to make decisions that could determine the life or death of people.

Lacan: The Subject Is Always Split

The theoretical position sketched out above can be further supplemented with some brief discussion of Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic conceptualizations of the human subject. For Lacan, the subject is always *already* split. They are born into the Symbolic realm (which we could roughly define as the socio-discursive sphere the subject enters into as they are born) and their whole existence is subsequently marked by a split or rupture. There is always some residual, or originary, part of the subject that cannot be completely assimilated into or by the Symbolic and by the subject themselves. This ontological lack or split always remains at the heart of the subject. This split is also partly constituted by the infant’s initial inability to completely control their own body. ‘This is why the infant depends on its caretakers to tend to its bodily needs. But this doesn’t mean that the child is fused with its mother.’ (Allen and Ruti 2019, p. 46), as Mari Ruti points out. For both Lacan and Klein, life is experienced as disorderly and threatening from the beginning—and yet symbolically mediated through the social realm. Additionally, Lacan constructs a view of the subject as always being intersubjectively related to the Other: an abstract fantasy figure shaped by actual other people whom the subject relates to. In that sense, the subject is additionally split between themselves and the Other, constantly trying to close the gap between the two

and striving for a harmonious sense of completion or unity with the Other that does not exist (Lacan 1971–72).

Lacan also developed the subject's relationship to the Symbolic realm and to knowledge with his notion of the five Discourses (that of the Master, the Hysteric, the University, the Analyst, and Capitalism). In Lacanian thinking, the term 'Discourse' refers to a particular epistemological universe that is made up of the social realm and how subjects are situated within it (Lacan 1993). A Discourse structures subjects' knowledge production, fantasies, and speech. It is beyond the scope of this article, to outline Lacan's theory of the Discourses in more detail. I focus on the Discourse of the Hysteric as it is most applicable to the subject matter at hand. When subjects occupy the position of the Hysteric's Discourse, they are not necessarily pathological or clinically unstable. 'Importantly, the fundamental Lacanian assumption is that every social bond is driven by unconscious force, a repressed "truth" that determines how the subject copes with its dividedness.' (Jacobsen 2020, p. 50). This repressed truth, in the context of the Hysteric's Discourse, animates (unconscious) desire to constantly shift from one object to the next. It is animated by anxiety in relation to what the Other hides or obfuscates from the subject and a constant demand by the subject for the Other to reveal everything (Lacan 2007). Vanheule provides a useful summary:

Central to the discourse of the hysteric is the active formulation of complaints (\$) and the search for an other who is presumed to have an answer (S1) for what bothers the subject. This discourse represses the truth that all desire rests on a lack that cannot be alleviated (a), and typically results in the production of narratives (S2) that don't solve the fundamental lack (a), but actually engender further irritation (\$). (Vanheule 2016, online).

Both the Lacanian Discourse of the Hysteric and the Kleinian paranoid-schizoid position can also be, but do not necessarily have to be seen, as correctives to injustice, abuse of power, or ideology, because they fundamentally question 'reality' itself. Doubt and paranoia become a means of survival for systematically oppressed people or communities, e.g. queers or people of colour, as thinkers such as Eve Sedgwick (2003), who drew on Klein, have argued, because they simply cannot trust the state, the police, or other institutions. Lacan functions as an important addition to Kleinian thinking here, because he reminds us that the subject is always already split and somewhat paranoid when being situated in particular social relations (Allen and Ruti 2019). The hysteric expressions of the paranoid-schizoid position on social media which I discuss in the next section are thus neither completely caused or triggered by Covid, nor are they specifically excessive or novel. As they are situated in existing social relations in many parts of the world that preceded Covid: systemic racism, economic exploitation, surveillance, and climate crises, to name but a few (Gentile 2020). Yet, there is *something* about them that is worthy of further reflection.

Paranoid-Schizoid Social Media

Against a backdrop of present uncertainty and anxiety, many individuals go on social media. Splitting on social media takes different forms and I do not mean to suggest that the examples I discuss in this article are representative or all encompassing. Coronavirus has presented us with anxiety, uncertainty, and death on a global scale. For many, it is a crisis which does not resemble anything they have ever experienced before. It is important to respond to such feelings of uncertainty and anxiety and social media

offer an important outlet or channel. The pandemic has brought us closer together as the whole world seems to be exposed to horror and tries to adjust to a new situation. Yet, *something* about our outpourings on social media makes me feel uneasy.

When I think about the many posts I have seen in the last few months, some have remained very visible in my memory. One is a type of post that I have seen many times: Someone very graphically and vividly informs their friends and followers that the situation is in reality far worse, that new statistics of rising cases or the death toll in a particular country are in reality much higher, that the worst is yet to come, and that all the measures a government has introduced are too little, too late. Such posts were particularly visible during the peak of the first wave in the UK and other countries. They have reappeared in my timelines and feeds as the second wave started to take hold in the late autumn of 2020. The post discussed here speaks like a Cassandra prophecy that could be true, might become true, or might be exaggerated. Who knows? All that matters for the individual user who posts is the momentary scale of apocalyptic catastrophe—and they might be absolutely right. ‘I know and I am going to tell you why,’ the user of such a post seems to say as they link to yet another article that updates us on global death figures.

Such kinds of posts might be necessary to wake up the others, including myself perhaps, who are in denial, or who think that everything is not all that bad, or that hope is on the horizon, or that we will get through this with a working vaccine. Yet, those posts split. They split off other news that might make us feel hopeful. They shun complexity or ambivalence in favour of clarity, and they do so with a *verve* and passion which I immediately associate with the Discourse of the Hysteric. I also feel as if such posts are attacking those who may not fully agree or point to other perspectives. As another example, I paraphrase one person who wrote on Twitter: ‘Those people who were infected last week, will die in the next few weeks.’ Knowledge, or its lack, becomes weaponized in such cases so that others may be persuaded or may already agree with such statements. Any ambivalence or other opinions are excluded.

Such exemplary posts that alert us could also be seen as paranoid by some. And they may sometimes not seem far off from conspiracy theories about COVID-19 which have also flooded the internet. Paranoia has a purpose in such instances. It functions as a defence mechanism against an intangible threat. Paranoia is thus a very natural and understandable response to a virus that is so contagious, invisible, untraceable, and to which there is no vaccine yet. We may feel overwhelmed and powerless in the face of such a Real force about which we know relatively little. Nothing seems good, healthy or normal about the state of the world right now as we see so many people suffering and dying. The conspiracy theories that link the spread of the 5G technology to coronavirus for example (Temperton 2020) can thus be seen as attempts, like many conspiracy theories, to make something unknown and threatening knowable and controllable. The ego achieves a mastery over external forces it cannot control by naming them, establishing alleged causalities, reasons, and explanations. It might seem difficult to remain rational and level-headed in times like these. They thus bring a sense of relief to those who (unconsciously) desire clarity, direction and clear knowledge.

Additionally, we understand through Klein that there is always a kind of residue in such paranoid-schizoid posts which point to the ‘originary’ paranoid-schizoid position of the infant. Subjects unconsciously re-experience moments of existential threat which they had felt before. Therefore, the paranoid-schizoid responses do not only occur in the vacuum of the coronavirus. They are shaped by subjects’ psychic dispositions and general mental health. We can analyse them further through Lacan. The posts serve as painful reminders

to the individual that they are a fundamentally lacking and split being. This is defended against via the Discourse of the Hysteric.

Such posts are also demands at the Other to reveal all the information, to provide help, to make it all stop. The Other, a god-like abstract figure for Lacan, refers to experts, politicians, scientists, and those in power in this case. While such posts may be paranoid-schizoid and hysteric, they are by no means completely irrational as e.g. the many scandals of the British government's handling of the pandemic have shown: a dysfunctional test and trace system, inaccurate tracking of infection rates, and many other catastrophic failures (Devlin 2020). In that sense, the neurotic demand that is articulated in the posts I have discussed is entirely understandable. Yet, the Discourse of the Hysteric is in the context of the pandemic illusionary. The Other *cannot* provide all the needed information and put an end to the pandemic. This is what many subjects do not wish to see.

In times of rising anxiety and hopelessness, they may also desire to occupy the Lacanian position of the Discourse of the Master themselves. The Master has absolute power over the subject and shows themselves as all-knowing. They believe to be whole and undivided (Lacan 2007). While they exploit other subjects (the Slave), the Master has repressed their own division. Such fantasies are mere fantasies but represent potent possibilities for subjects who feel powerless and can only think in a paranoid-schizoid mode. We can illustrate such a desire to become the Master further if we evoke the so-called 'Covid truthers' who confidently proclaim that the virus is fake or that the pandemic has ended (Temperton 2020). Such instances are aggressive defence mechanisms against uncertainty and existential threats.

The particular responses I have discussed here are of further significance when seen in light of the increased racist attacks against Chinese and Asian people in the West ever since the pandemic started to spread. Fuelled by right-wing populists such as Donald Trump, who repeatedly spoke of the 'China virus', the racist subject finds someone who is allegedly responsible for everything, rather than being able to acknowledge the fundamental uncertainty and insecurity of the present moment. However, there are of course also other online responses to our current crisis. I discuss them in the next section.

Caring but Splitting

Another recent social media post that stuck out for me was a tweet early on during the pandemic in the spring of 2020 in which someone asked other Twitter users not to tweet photos that showed them wearing masks. This should be observed in order to protect others against trauma, because they may have encountered masks in traumatic situations (e.g. in medical treatment). A tweet that on the surface seemed to be about protecting those who may be 'triggered' by seeing protective face masks. While the tweet may be understandable, I would argue that it points to the same problematic splitting mechanism we see everywhere today: it named something (masks) as bad for some people and subsequently asked everybody else to banish this bad practice. Additionally, the person asking everyone not to tweet images of masks assumed that many other people would find those traumatic, while it may have been only a few. We may debate whether the tweet could have been actually adhered to by others. The point is its underlying binary of good vs. bad, a binary that is reproduced by the very functioning of social media where users can either see everything or very little. Accounts are either public or private. A more complex working of social media, in this case Twitter,

where those who would not want to see photos of masks could restrict or disable them, is not possible. It is not desired by social media. If in times of COVID-19, the choice is only to tweet death or to tweet life, it seems like we are running out of options.

Even the positive and uplifting memes, videos, or gifs that now make the rounds on our newsfeeds and timelines often reproduce the binary logic of splitting. One image which appeared numerous times on my Facebook newsfeed shows the following sentence in colourful letters:

It's okay to NOT be at your MOST PRODUCTIVE during a FUCKING GLOBAL PANDEMIC (No author 2020, online, emphases in original).

It may be okay, but what about those who feel strangely productive or feel they are able to carry on as normal? In their recent open letter to psychoanalysts, Marcus Coelen, Patricia Gherovici, David Lichtenstein, Evan Malater, and Jamieson Webster wrote:

[W]e find many patients who are doing fine or even doing better, who like externalized chaos, or whose melancholia is abated by the nearness of death and reproach; those who are used to doing their own thing and who find their anxiety and sadness contained and cohered by the pervasive force of a virus that shuts all down. (Coelen et al. 2020, online).

Such an observation may be applicable to many of us, not just patients. The image about being productive during a pandemic is another instance of splitting because it disavows, while seemingly being about the opposite, any other responses to the coronavirus pandemic where individuals may feel productive or may tell themselves that they are productive. Being productive is not okay, the image tells us, because we are in the middle of a global pandemic. In its very understandable wish to make space for uncertainty, contradiction, and unproductivity, the image shuts out any other responses at the same time. It wants to be containing and comforting but is consistent with the current social media logic of the paranoid-schizoid. It wants to move beyond the Discourse of the Hysteric but reproduces its basic parameters nonetheless. It is such a logic of monism which is pervasive both in networks and in discourses about coronavirus at the moment that needs to be broken. Even positive posts or ideas, like the ones I have just outlined, follow a seeming logic of care which betrays itself because certain positions are idealized and designated as the only possible ways of thinking in that moment. A kind of dualist thinking or one that allows for more ambivalence is often absent. This is both desired by networks and the companies that run the platforms we use, because they need certainty and clarity, but it is also a characteristic of the current crisis where responses or ways of thinking that go against a kind of common sense understanding seem out of place or inappropriate. It is also for those reasons that I have named my critique in this article 'hesitant', because it feels a little wrong of me to articulate it at this moment. Zooming in on the two types of posts that are discussed in this article does not mean that they would be representative or all-encompassing of subjects' responses to COVID-19 on social media. Many users also show nuanced, balanced, and complex ways of articulating their feelings, anxieties, and desires in light of the present situation. However, those were, at least in my observations, in the minority. This may also have something to do with the technological make-up of social media platforms themselves.

Digital Target or Waste: The Binary of 0s and 1s

While the kind of posts I have discussed so far can be seen as expressions of our general psychodynamics, they are amplified by social media. They point to an underlying, far bigger, problem and dynamic which has to do with the technological workings of social media. The social media critic Geert Lovink has argued that Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Weibo, and other platforms have not created real communities or feelings of community (Lovink 2019). They have isolated users and greedily feed on their individual anxieties, anger, alienation, and hopes for love, care, and communication. Social media are businesses that depend on targeted advertising. They sell individual user data to advertisers so that they can target users with individual ads (Fuchs 2014). Real, communal characteristics of social media are at best underdeveloped or are lacking altogether, because they are deemed unnecessary by the platforms. Such an interface structure becomes all the more visible in a time of crisis. Our feelings are exploited rather than truly cared for. Social media are not built on community or capaciousness but on the individual. The media theorist Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2018) has argued that such splitting according to specific characteristics (that often has commercial goals) is an inherent part of digital networks as such. According to her, networks operate on principles of *homophily*, whereby individuals are clustered together according to shared and similar principles (friendships, declared interests, likes, location, and other characteristics).

Network science unravels a vast collective nonconscious, encased within the fishbowl of digital media. It is the bastard child of psychoanalysis: there are no accidents, no innocent slips of the tongue. Each action is part of a larger pattern/symptom. The goal: to answer that unanswerable question, what do (wo)men want? (Chun 2018, p. 69).

Social media companies pose that question so that they can better steer users to customized advertising. They want to know users' desires so that advertisers can sell products that cater for those desires. This is done by clustering users together according to similar characteristics. It is also done through splitting the user from their data which are tracked, analysed, and used for commercial purposes. Users have little knowledge and control over such processes; they occur in the collective nonconscious of social media companies and other platforms. Only certain user data are of relevance and the underlying logic through which it is decided by algorithms what is relevant or not is also a paranoid-schizoid one.

Calculations of each person's marketing value are produced, based on behavioural and other forms of data tracking, and each individual is categorised as target or waste. (Kennedy 2016, p. 47).

Such a binary logic splits the user into good or bad, 1 or 0. All of those dynamics are *dis/individualising* (Johanssen 2019) or humanizing and dehumanizing at the same time. They dehumanize and disindividualize users by tracking and appropriating their data for purposes they know little about. The very clusterings of networks that Chun describes are also examples of automatic processes that occur without users' explicit knowledge about them. All of this is done based on the principle of homophily which seems inherently benign and like a productive way of managing vast networks: similarity breeds connection. Individuals want to be together with like-minded others, and this is evident in how we generally form friendships and relationships for example (Chun 2018). However, there is not only a violent splitting inherent to homophily in networks, but such practices also erase the politics of networks, as

Chun argues: historical contexts, economic issues, discrimination. Specific groups and networks as a whole are made to be the same, while there are in reality differences between individual users within a network.

At the same time, social media are so attractive to individuals because they address them as such. They are *individualising* (Johanssen 2019). Social media work through individual accounts where users can create a sense of (online) identity, get in touch with others and exchange ideas, images, and fantasies. As Balick (2014) and Singh (2019) have both argued, social media promise and respond to the human desire for intersubjective recognition. In being seen as an individual online, the user feels recognized, validated, and reassured that they really do exist. Such feelings may very well exist in many users and I do not mean to outrightly dismiss social media. Social media can enable meaningful and hopeful communication. The promise of recognition is coupled with active signals on the part of social media companies to the user how valued they are. This shows itself, for instance, in how the user is directly addressed, e.g. on Facebook and asked: ‘What is on your mind?’ In the eyes of Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms, users are only seen and named as *good*—as long as they log on and engage with the platform. The fact that fundamentally *bad* things take place beyond the users’ awareness (e.g. the Cambridge Analytica scandal; user data being sold to advertisers, or social media data being used for surveillance) is fundamentally split off by tech CEOs themselves. Reflecting on the Cambridge Analytica scandal and fake news epidemic on Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg initially simply called it ‘a pretty crazy idea’ and accused critics of ‘a profound lack of empathy’ (Healey and Potter, 2018, p. 671). Zuckerberg has publicly emphasized the positive and caring aspects of Facebook for example and downplayed recent scandals. Social media are themselves split.

Beneath the Surface: Affect

Why does splitting occur in times like ours? Why do some subjects occupy the position of the hysteric? In psychoanalytic terms, such posts serve the function of discharging unpleasant affects. For Freud (Freud 1981b), affect, or an affective experience, refers to an individual body which undergoes a feeling of loss of agency and bodily dispossession (Johanssen, 2019). Such mechanisms lie behind the splitting dynamics we see. In an affective experience:

‘my body speaks itself to me’; when I am feeling, I possess my body, but at that same moment, the body is also its own speaker, and the three terms join together and link my possession (‘my’), the object of this possession (‘body’), and that which denies my possession (‘it speaks’ – and in that it is its own master, or speaker, thereby denying my possession of itself). (Stein 1999, p. 127).

We may understand current affective experiences for many as being characterized by anxious and uncertain states which express themselves in diffuse bodily feelings. They not least show themselves affectively, because the virus itself and its contagious nature silently affect and infect the body, often without symptoms. The sudden loss of control and bodily autonomy that marks the affective experience in general is also applicable to the particular experience of being infected with COVID-19. This state of affective displeasure is defended against through splitting, as outlined above. The dangers of a silent, invisible, and still largely unknown virus thus result in particular affective bodily states that users do not understand. Such states need to be ‘discharged’ (Freud 1981b), to leave the body,

so that the subject can return to a momentary state of relief and calm. Posting on social media ‘is an attempt to translate and express something that is intersected by an affective dimension and was first experienced as a bodily state.’ (Johanssen 2016, p. 212). In turning affective states into language (posts on social media), users discharge them as they are able to provide clear narratives which re-establish agency and a sense of reality. Their posts figure as external accounts that everyone else can see and engage with. Posting thus marks a momentary end to the affective experiences and brings back a sense of agency to the individual. In that sense, those posts, even though they reveal a tendency of splitting, are useful for individuals and their mental health—at least momentarily. Given the ongoing pandemic, the uncertainty and anxiety that many feel will return and there is a need for it to be discharged again. However, splitting is only an attempt to symbolically *cover over* a kind of affective void at the core of individuals. In Lacanian terms, it is an attempt to cover over the lack at the heart of the subject. It is a defence against rather than an acknowledgement of affective states. It is not healthy for the individual, and by extension society, because complex developments and processes are viewed in a reductionist way. It can never successfully bring lasting calmness for the individual. It also operates with a logic where everything that and everyone who are not compatible with someone’s schematic worldview are designated as enemies and excluded. A different response than splitting is outlined in the next section.

Towards a Depressive Position

It has been suggested that we are currently going through grief on a planetary scale (Berinato 2020). We share it online, because that is something one does today. David Kessler, author of many books about grief, argued that grief is the defining moment currently because the world seems to have changed forever. ‘The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we’re grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air.’ (Kessler cited in Berinato 2020, online). However, elevating grief to a collective feeling is too simplistic. It devalues grief for those who are really grieving because they have lost family members, partners, or friends. Grief implies a feeling in relation to something distinct that has happened, e.g. the death of a loved one and, as Freud (1981a) argued, it involves a process of detachment from someone who is lost. Grief splits the world into a ‘before—and after’ state. Kessler also claims that we are currently feeling ‘anticipatory grief’ (Kessler cited in Berinato 2020, online). It is ‘that feeling we get about what the future holds when we’re uncertain. Usually it centres on death.’ (ibid). A kind of grief that anticipates a future that can only be catastrophic and, as Kessler claims, as a result, individuals have lost their sense of safety. I regard such forms of schematic thinking as unhelpful. How can we anticipate grief when we do not know what the future holds? How can we grieve when we do not know what we have lost? The world is changing but not so fundamentally as many argue. There will be a post-Corona world, but will it be so fundamentally different from how our world was just a couple of months ago? Such forms of schematic thinking are particularly evident on social media, as discussed. Nonetheless, the idea of grief is helpful to unpack further because it suggests that we have to let go of some things that we held dear or took for granted in the past. It can be discussed through the Kleinian depressive position (Klein 1988a, b).

While it may be paranoid-schizoid of *myself* to critically discuss the kind of posts I have referred to, because I am actually defending against dealing with the reality of the genuine

paranoid-schizoid state of the world, I nonetheless regard the excessiveness with which sentiments of death and despair are pushed out into the public sphere as problematic and too schematic. My own reading of the posts may be considered defensive and my advocacy of a depressive position could be seen as illusionary at this moment in time. However, I think the paranoid-schizoid elements need to be acknowledged but they can be responded to with other dynamics. What then might a response be to what I have discussed? How can we move beyond the paranoid-schizoid?

The paranoid-schizoid position is momentary and the young infant, while always retaining paranoid-schizoid elements throughout life, moves to the so-called depressive position after approximately the first six months in life (Klein 1988a, b). The depressive position refers to the individual's ability to let go of splitting. The world is perceived in a more realistic manner, and others are recognized as separate and as existing in their own right. The other is acknowledged as one who both gratifies and frustrates. The depressive position may be accompanied by feelings of guilt, grief, or the desire to make whole again, to repair what was damaged in the paranoid-schizoid position. Eventually, the ability to empathize with others is formed.

For Klein, any object always also has inherently good elements. The death drive inherent in the paranoid-schizoid position can destroy the goodness of an object. Moving towards the depressive position, both in general and in relation to social media, would allow us to see the horrifying reality of the current crisis as well as signs of hope, joy and love within it. '[D]amage is no longer feared as total destruction.' (Segal 2004, p. 42). The depressive position makes room for ambivalence and uncertainty. Everything exists side by side. It means we need to let go of clear-cut narratives and stories. In the depressive positions, loss can be accepted and the future can be seen as bringing good experiences.

An obstacle on this route may be social media companies because they do not want ambivalence. Ambivalence specifically goes against binaries. Advertisers need certainty, clear emotions, and sentiments. Thinking about moving towards the depressive position in terms both of COVID-19 and the workings of social media in general means to make space for more ambivalence. The binary technological foundations of networks and platforms which I have discussed via Chun (2018) would need to change from profit-driven instances of individualism to truly communal spaces of complexity, spaces which can enable and tolerate the depressive position—this point would be subject to more detailed discussion in a future article. Regarding our own responses to the current pandemic, we should first admit that the world is currently truly depressing in a kind of common-sense usage of the term but that this always implies more if we follow Klein. It implies acknowledging anxiety, loss and uncertainty, and seeing a future that will allow survival and hope. In more practical terms, this can for instance mean to intervene when we see the kinds of post I have discussed in this article and to comment on them in a way that makes space for other perspectives. Whatever the world may look like in the weeks and months to come, it is not as split as it is often portrayed. We should embrace the good and bad elements and the fundamental uncertainty of it all.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that many of the posts on social media about coronavirus are split along a paranoid-schizoid dynamic and are situated within the Discourse of the Hysterical. Such content is amplified, and perhaps *encouraged*, by social media which generally

function according to the same dualist dynamic of splitting users and their data into good and bad, desirable and undesirable. While individual responses may change, the technical workings of social media and their underlying profit motives are harder to alter. A psychoanalytic perspective on the type of dynamics that were outlined in this article helps to understand the subjective dynamics which are intertwined with technological ones. While it is natural for humans to respond with splitting to the uncertainty and crises they face, the depressive position makes for a healthier and ultimately more sustainable response. It is a response we should all work towards.

Some psychoanalytic commentaries on the present moment have suggested that the world has already changed or is in the process of fundamentally changing (Gentile 2020). Slavoj Žižek has argued that the pandemic ‘confronts us with something previously thought to be the impossible: the world as we knew it has stopped turning, whole countries are in a lockdown.’ (Žižek 2020, p. 96). Yet, I would argue that such a vision is premature and somewhat fantasmatic. We are not entering post-capitalist times. The world has not changed that dramatically as far as capitalist economies are concerned. Such arguments are similar to the instances of splitting that I have discussed in this article. They speak to a desire for revolutionary change that may be brought about by a fundamental crisis in which both the subject and their surroundings are destroyed and built anew. Yet, we are far from such a moment.

The question is rather how individuals can traverse the fantasy and leave behind paranoid-schizoid splitting and the Discourse of the Hysteric. The ‘worst that can happen to the hysteric social bond’, as Jacobsen points out, ‘is if the “other” caves to the criticism and gives up its position as the master who produces new solutions. This would force the subject to take responsibility for its own choices and decisions, and ultimately, confront its own desire.’ (Jacobsen 2020, p. 51). This would open up the potential to move towards a depressive position. Those who embody the position of the Master—politicians and experts—should renounce their claims of total knowledge. Instead, we should embrace another possibility that has also been brought about by Covid: ‘a break in the conventional ordering of knowledge, conditioning us to bear and possibly even acquire a taste for the uncertainty, precarity, and tumult of being alive.’ (Gentile 2020, p. 652). This means an absolute and open commitment to the limits of science, knowledge, and data-driven prediction and technology. Experts and ordinary citizens alike can never fully know the novel coronavirus. Some politicians have admitted to having made mistakes in managing the health crisis, others have said that their present knowledge has limits (Devlin 2020). Those admissions are very important and present reparative efforts. Such articulations are akin to the Lacanian Discourse of the Analyst. For Lacan, the analyst occupies the position of the analysand’s Other but their desire remains enigmatic. This animates a therapeutic process, whereby the analysand tries to discover what the analyst wants from them. The analyst commits to the limits of their own knowledge and thereby enables the patient to work through their own desires, conflicts, and fantasies (Lacan 1972). Both ordinary citizens and ‘experts’ should assume the position of the analyst. This means acknowledging the limits of knowledge and coming to terms with how their existing paranoid-schizoid and depressive modes of relating inform their response to COVID-19, on social media and beyond. Such modes of relating are possible ‘only if we surrender certainty and remain open to the strange and its wildness in a kind of interminable analysis.’ (Gentile 2020, p. 663).

Assuming such positions does not mean that paranoia itself needs to be completely abandoned. Paranoia is very important, but it needs to be situated within an open, depressive mode of relating.

Compliance with Ethical Standard

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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