

Comment Piece

Searching for the Elusive “Covidiot”: Moral Governance, Policing and the Social Production of Ignorance in a (Post-) Pandemic World

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ABSTRACT

This comment piece examines the social figure of the “covidiot”, which emerged at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic and has been used for social and political purposes since then. We argue that the covidiot is a somewhat elusive figure whose formation actualizes wider symbolic struggles over moral and epistemological issues that speak to contemporary social anxieties. Firstly, the paper suggests that the covidiot is typically imagined as a figure of blame through which certain individuals and groups are moralized for their failure to follow social distance regulations. The covidiot is thereby constructed as a threat to the moral social order and subjected to forms of policing and governance. In these processes, attributions of covidioty and their contestations can be read as struggles for moral hegemony which serve to construct moral boundaries between deserving and undeserving citizens. Secondly, the paper offers a preliminary critique of the social production of ignorance, pointing out how the political uses of the covidiot obscure the societal processes that produce systemic ignorance, allocate blame in individuals while undervaluing the responsibility of corporations, media outlets or the nation-state. This figure is therefore implicated in struggles over epistemic authority characteristic of our present post-truth era.

Keywords: social control, COVID-19, social figures, moral governance, ignorance

On August 2020, Stephanie Whitfield was portrayed in a news story in which she argued that her TUI flight from the Greek island Zante to Cardiff was “full of selfish ‘covidiot’ and an inept crew who couldn’t care less” (BBC, 2020), describing how fellow passengers refused to wear masks, wandered around the aisle or switched seats. Reports stated that 16 passengers so far tested positive for COVID-19. Whitfield alleged that she and her husband experienced minor symptoms and were self-isolating, a decision they already made in the plane. Around the same time, news media reported that a group of around 30 young adults, recently returned to Plymouth from Zante, may have contracted the virus. 11 members of the group, who became known as the “Zante 30”, were already diagnosed. But a number of them showed few or no symptoms and therefore did not self-quarantine after returning. Two establishments in Plymouth temporarily closed as a result and the city was said to be “divided” over the teenagers’ responsibility for the spread of the virus (Dennett, 2020; Morris, 2020).

Although for many commentators on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, anyone travelling during the pandemic was undoubtedly a covidiot, for some travelers the category clearly did not include them. Certain details, such as the motive of the journey, whether the trip was domestic or international and the self-perception

of being a “good citizen” seemed to allow these travelers to separate themselves from covidiot. In the UK at the time, Greece was on the list of “safe” countries exempt from quarantine rules. By calling out and shaming fellow passengers as irresponsible, self-serving and lacking concern for others, Whitfield and other travelers could portray themselves as the very opposite, namely as responsible, concerned and policy-abiding individuals.

The neologism covidiot has been a near constant presence throughout the pandemic. It came into public focus in the month of March 2020 when it was adopted by various online commentators whose use of the term was picked up by news media. Already by March 16th a definition of the term was posted on the user-generated website *Urban Dictionary*: “Relating to the 2020 COVID-19 virus: Someone who ignores the warnings regarding public health or safety. A person who hoards goods, denying them from their neighbors” (*Urban Dictionary*, 2020). As the neologism spread, it was most commonly used to lambast those who put others at risk of being infected by breaking social distancing regulations. This is reflected in definitions of the term by more “legitimate” dictionaries like *The Cambridge Dictionary*, where it refers to “someone who behaves in a stupid way that risks spreading the infectious disease COVID-19” (*Cambridge Dictionary*, n. d.). Oxford University Press acknowledged its influence on the English language by including it in their list of the words of the year 2020 (*Oxford Languages*, 2020). The term also had considerable cross-linguistic spread, including rudimentary adaptations in French, German, Italian, and Spanish (Roig-Marín, 2020).

As the episode about the TUI flight illustrates, the term has been deployed in public discourse not only to condemn or ridicule a set of individuals for their “selfish” or “stupid” behavior, but also to describe a certain type of person who, as we will argue, symbolizes particular elements of the social and affective experience characteristic of our pandemic times. In short, we suggest that the covidiot has become a social figure (cf. le Grand, 2019; Moser and Schlechtriemen, 2018). The covidiot is undoubtedly a figure for whom the “anti-social” label is particularly apt (the “serial killer” and the “yob” are other examples, albeit for different reasons). In the pantheon of figures emerging during the pandemic (Ironstone, 2020; Schlechtriemen and Moser, 2021), the covidiot has, together with the “anti-vaxxer”, very much become the villainous or foolish other against which heroic or respectable figures such as “the essential worker” (Ironstone, 2020) or “good citizen” (Lim, 2020) have been imagined. Yet, a more thorough investigation shows that the covidiot figures in more multi-faceted, contested and ambiguous ways. Like other figures, the covidiot can in some contexts carry social information that connotes “prestige” rather than “stigma” (Goffman, 1963: 43-48). One example is recent research about how gay men engaging in “casual sexual activity” during the pandemic challenge the stigma of covidiot, which “reminds us that there are many ways to live with COVID-19 beyond social distancing” (Lim, 2020: 80).

In this comment piece, we examine the shifting and somewhat elusive ways in which the covidiot has been imagined in public discourse. Although some scholars are unsure whether the term covidiot will “stand the test of time” (Stanwell-Smith, 2020) (and its use has indeed decreased over time), our interest lies in how this figure may be a point of entry to explore wider social processes in the wake of the pandemic. Inspired by Raymond Williams’ methodology, Penelope Ironstone (2020) has explored the meaning and significance of different “key words” emerging during the pandemic. In a similar vein, we suggest that the covidiot is a “key figure” (cf. Barker et al., 2013) that symbolizes our collective social experience of this global tragedy, particularly our anxieties and fears. To this end, we attempt to show that the covidiot actualizes wider symbolic struggles over moral and epistemological issues in the contemporary moment. Our argument is that the emergence of the covidiot is bound up with struggles for moral hegemony that involve forms of governance and social control, as well as struggles for epistemic authority rooted in the social production of ignorance characteristic of our current post-truth era.

During the height of the pandemic, the covidiot was everywhere: In our endless debates in social media, in countless news stories and in a wide range of other cultural goods including songs, short films, videoblogs, books, clothing and political cartoons (see, e.g., Cagle, 2020; de Juan, 2020; FIRSTACTION, 2020; Teehop, n. d.; ThunderKant, 2020). Some of these cultural products were low-budget productions, but their creative use of the figure of the covidiot demonstrates that the term escaped any narrow political and epidemiological definition and became part of our (digital) social life and our entertainment. This particularly goes for tabloids and sensationalistic websites whose main function is to produce “clickbaits”. One reason is that the covidiot figure allows for the expression of *Schadenfreude* resulting from watching someone getting the punishment that they deserve (even if only in the form of social censorship). A frequent stream of news stories on covidiotics reported, in often alarmist fashion, on various individuals’ alleged immoral and irrational transgressions of social distancing regulations. Like the episodes about the Zante flights, the covidiotics in these stories were frequently young people, lambasted for being irresponsible, stupid, selfish and spoilt. Take, for example, this tabloid headline: “FLIPPING IDIOTS. Group of 11 covidiotics who drove 150 miles from London for hike in Peak District are caught by cops after crashing car” (Duggan, 2021). One can also mention the indignation directed against what was seen as a sense of entitlement and hypocrisy expressed by celebrities, such as pop stars and footballers, who told their social media followers to stay home, then thoughtlessly broke those rules themselves (sometimes getting infected in the process) (cf. Cottle, 2021).

Stories such as these often convey a sense of righteous moral indignation and public shaming of the transgressing individuals. This combination of indignation and entertainment recalls Max Scheler's argument that the complex experience of resentment he calls *resentment* involves a certain pleasure (Scheler, 1961: 8). Considering the context of isolation and segregation required during the pandemic, which technically removed public spaces as the place of social clash or encounter, it could be argued that the inflammatory discourse about the covidiot in the online public sphere served to extend or supplant the social control frequently experienced in the streets. Moreover, a major component of the different cultural products that address the covidiot is the "morality tale", the endless clash between forces of "good" and "evil", which in complex societies relates to narratives of policing and punishment of transgressive acts. In a short film entitled "COVIDiot Positive" (FIRSTACTION, 2020), a jealous ex-husband hires a hitman to murder his former wife, who is already in a new relationship. Once the hitman enters the former wife's apartment, he is inevitably doomed, as his target has been self-isolating after having tested positive. The comic ending of this story suggests that the covidiot could be used to arouse a wide diversity of emotions, beyond those of anger, contempt and indignation.

But whilst often represented in individualized ways, covidiotics have also been imagined in collective terms, sometimes referencing the figure of the virulent. The latter is known in Italy through the term *untore*, which can be traced back to the plague in the 16th and 17th Century, and refers to those who were said to voluntarily infect others by contaminating public spaces. It has been suggested that *untore* were scapegoats blamed for spreading a deadly disease which has parallels with the covidiot (Agamben, 2020). In this way, the *untore* can be conceived as a prefiguration or forerunner figure (Moser and Schlechtriemen, 2018) to the covidiot. In some sense, "covidiot" related to (foreign) "tourists" references the animosity that visitors experienced in many travel destinations such as Venice or Amsterdam, where "tourists" have been stigmatized as a plague, an invasion or a natural disaster (for example, an avalanche).

As denoting collectives, "covidiot" also seems to be a contested figure used to discredit political opponents. In Spain, for example, the feminist rally locally known as 8-M in 2020 was the target of several discreditation campaigns, frequently coming from the "nationalist, far right". Later that year, it was the anti-lockdown protests by these "nationalist, far right" groups that became emblematic of the alleged idiocy. A publication entitled *The Handbook of the Covidiot (El Manual del Covidiota)* (de Juan, 2020) highlights this process of allocating blame in the Spanish context, in which political adversaries used the covidiot figure as a way to censor the behaviors of Others. Targets were as diverse as the aforementioned feminist march 8-M, a political rally in Vistalegre by the national-conservative party Vox, Chinese people and the spectators at the UEFA Champions League football tournament. Relatedly, in Germany, research by the WZB (Grande et al., 2021) called into question common assumptions apropos anti-lockdown protesters: Are these people indeed from the "far right"? How much support do they have from the general population? In their findings, the demonstrators were identified as a heterogeneous collective, from the unrepresented political "center", seduced by conspiracy theories and with a potential for radicalization. This narrative about "protesters" as "idiots" is far from new, and academic literature on the protest paradigm (McLeod, 2007) has illustrated the strategies used by media outlets to discredit, delegitimize and demonize both dissenters and their political causes.

We can note that common to many figurations of "covidioty" is their emphasis on the failings and flaws of certain individuals or groups. This serves to construct moral boundaries between deserving and undeserving citizens. Given the arguably widespread social anxiety over the pandemic, the covidiotics' violations of common guidelines are viewed as threats to the moral social order. Governing and policing their transgressive behavior can thus be seen as part of a struggle to impose the dominant values in the social order and thereby reassert moral hegemony (cf. Hunt, 2011). These practices are bound up with processes of self-formation and self-governance (cf. Dean, 1994), as those who attribute blame onto the purported covidiotics, can view themselves as righteous and rightfully included in the social body. In this way, we would argue that attributions of covidioty and their contestations involve symbolic struggles for moral hegemony.

As we have seen, the covidiot figures in differing contexts where it "sticks" onto a wide range of individuals. Yet, common to many representations of this figure is that they involve an element of "ignorance". This means that the covidiot in question, at least to some extent, is said to be unaware of or ignore the harm their behavior may cause. But what are the origins of this "ignorance"? When casting individuals as covidiotics the explanations of their behavior tends to be reduced to their individual "stupidity". Thus, the public debate often fails to address the social production of ignorance, that is, the wider social processes influencing the strategies and practices of individuals and groups. In their work on agnotology (the study of social ignorance), Proctor, Schiebinger, and other scholars have explored "how ignorance is produced or maintained in diverse settings, through mechanisms such as deliberate or inadvertent neglect, secrecy and suppression, document destruction, unquestioned tradition, and myriad forms of inherent (or avoidable) culturological selectivity" (Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008: vii). Is the covidiot a result of our own covidiotic politicians and public policies, which were caught off guard apropos the pandemic? Is it the result of budget cuts that for decades impacted the education system, the health system? What

is its link to populism and ethno-nationalism, for leaders such as Bolsonaro, Modi and Trump? Are political leaders in the Global North covidiot for refusing to share vaccine patents with the South?

While it is beyond the scope of this comment piece to unpack all these questions connected to the social production of ignorance, we would argue that they involve epistemological struggles related to the “post-truth” condition characterizing our present historical moment and which represents an epistemic crisis (cf. Harsin, 2018). In such a context, the authority of political and scientific institutions to advocate certain regulations or recommendations can be significantly undermined. Together with a general mistrust towards traditional public authorities, there is widespread “cognitive inertia” i.e. “indifference to what is truth and what is a lie” (Salecl, 2020: 5).

In Brazil, President Bolsonaro engaged in “strategic ignorance” by aggressively rejecting established scientific expertise on COVID-19 and mobilizing a policy agenda based on false claims. In a health care system already weakened by neoliberal reforms failing to provide for disadvantaged groups, he advocated hydroxychloroquine as a form of treatment, pushed for a herd immunity strategy, refrained from any form of social distancing (eventually contracting the virus himself) and criticized regional and local governments for introducing such policies (Duarte, 2020; Ortega and Orsini, 2020). Bolsonaro’s claims were supported in a disinformation campaign on WhatsApp. This social media application is widely adopted among Brazilians who regularly use it for information on political issues (Soares et al., 2021). An institutional factor behind the influence of “fake news” in online settings, such as WhatsApp, is that due to the proliferation of big data it is harder to trace and determine the validity of truth claims (Salecl, 2020). In the Brazilian context, another structural condition for the production of ignorance is that a majority of the country’s adults lack a high school diploma (Neto and Pimenta, 2020). Such structural dimensions are likely to influence the impact of the epistemological production of ignorance enacted by Bolsonaro and other actors.

In India policymakers similarly engaged in “protective stupidity” (Salecl, 2020) by either ignoring or responding late to scientific guidelines, even allowing for mass gatherings during political rallies (Singh, 2021). Notably, Health Minister Harsh Vardhan recommended including dark chocolate (a commodity that is out of reach to thousands of impoverished Indian citizens) in their diet as a way to beat COVID-19 stress (The Tribune, 2021). *The Economist* mocked this statement using the paraphrase: “Let them eat dark chocolate” (The Economist, 2021). These examples complicate the notion that the covidiot is genuinely ignorant and that individuals who are influenced by populist discourse are simply “stupid” (cf. Moran and Little, 2020: 861). Instead, the cases discussed in this section suggest that this figure is implicated in epistemological struggles where structural factors influence the production and diffusion of knowledge and powerful actors deliberately and wilfully deny certain knowledge claims to serve their own ends. Thus, an examination of the origins of the “covidioty”—and any “idiocy” in general—requires a dissection of the structure and the dynamics of (political and economic) power. Who profits from collective ignorance?

In this comment piece, we have proposed to understand the covidiot as a somewhat porous figure that emerges in shifting ways: it is directed against different social and political fractions; it is mostly used in a stigmatizing fashion but it can also have more positive connotations; it serves to moralize and police certain people but in so doing makes others feel respectable and morally righteous; it involves social forms of ignorance linked to both deliberate practices of denial and states of non-knowledge. To this end, we have suggested that an investigation of the covidiot addresses symbolic struggles that speak to contemporary social anxieties and involve forms of moral hegemony, governance and social control as well as the social production of pseudo-knowledge and political polarization linked to our present post-truth condition. While the covidiot might eventually become a figure of the past, the concerns and anxieties surrounding it may endure to give form to new (or familiar) social figures to take its place.

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