THE DIGITAL INEQUALITY LAB

The Lag Manifesto

ABSTRACT In this article, we deploy media studies, digital studies, and critical theories of race, gender, and sexuality to analyze twinned phenomena: the overlapping pandemics of SARS-CoV-2 and of anti-Black racism in the summer of 2020. We analyze how a creative orientation to lag can contest how digital infrastructures' economies, narratives, and underlying forms of labor have harmed the most vulnerable segments of society in the United States. Analyzing discourses of heroism and viral Instagram trends during the revolutionary summer of 2020, we historicize the twinned pandemics of 2020 and value lag as a praxis of self care and community care.

KEYWORDS COVID-19, infrastructure, anti-blackness, activism, Instagram, lag

INTRODUCTION

Lag is a cultural symptom of SARS-CoV-2.[1] Pandemics create lag in a global temporality. A frictionless world is impossible. SARS-CoV-2 reminds us of the unequally distributed experience of global events. SARS-CoV-2 has revealed the lags inherent to the system.

Lag is a social condition and a technical artifact that exposes the always-already-present disjoint between realities. We situate lag in dialogue with other cultural theories of slowing down action in a media-saturated present. In our theorizing through lag, we follow Tung-Hui Hu in "understand[ing] lethargy as a general exhaustion of communicative agency."[2] Lag is as social as it is technical; the latter scaffolds upon the logic of the former. Lag undergirds the containment strategy of quarantine. In order for containment of a pandemic to be effective, individuals are asked to take action in the present in order to prevent *future* infection. Action against SARS-CoV-2 can only occur within this lag.

We ask several pressing questions at the intersection of social, technological, and epidemiological lags. What new orientations to technology does the lens of "lag" offer? Why do we feel compelled to pour ourselves and our energies into our work and our screens? Is there no alternative to the Zoom room? What does more time mean or look like when you *feel* like you don't have any? And, ultimately, what possibilities might arise if we made our virtual social solidarity *more* laggy in response to the social, technological, and epidemiological lags laid bare by SARS-CoV-2?

1. We chose to use the name SARS-CoV-2 rather than COVID-19, as it is more properly applied to the disease and its ongoing variants. We take this information from a glossary published by Yale Medicine. See Kathy Katella, "Our New COVID-19 Vocabulary—What Does It All Mean?" Yale Medicine, April 7, 2020, www.yalemedicine.org/news/covid-19-glossary.

2. Tung-Hui Hu, "Wait, Then Give Up: Lethargy and the Reticence of Digital Art," in *Journal of Visual Culture* 16, no. 3 (2017): 345.

One of SARS-CoV-2's physical and social symptoms is exhaustion. In the summer of 2020, there was limited and often conflicting information about the virus, no certainty or solid ground. Much of our theorizing about the unknowability of SARS-CoV-2 relates directly to that original moment of writing, even as now, multiple years into the pandemic, many old and new questions about SARS-CoV-2 remain. This epistemological condition spreads exhaustion virally, as we all seek to know as much as we can of a largely unknowable situation. Or we give up. Often we do both.

We, the Digital Inequality Lab, wrote this article as a collaborative group of digital studies scholars who met for several writing sessions on the video conferencing platform Bluejeans during the summer of 2020. We revisited this document for revisions in the summer and fall of 2021. #StopAPIAHate has joined #BLM in circulation, even as critical attention to racial justice activism has ebbed and increasingly urgent calls for normalcy—to brunch, to travel, to reopen—have become central to conversations in both the media and privileged spaces. Remote work and learning opportunities and accommodations made widely available in the early months of the pandemic, which many in the disability community had been calling for for years, have been steadily rolled back. Even as the Omicron variant began circulating in late 2021, many universities remained hesitant to return to remote operations or otherwise change their plans for the first semester of 2022. As academics, we relate to the world by means of a familiar tension between the national attention span and our commitment to engaging with structural and global injustices. Our writing lags behind the flow of current events due to the usually slow pace of academic publishing, but we believe our residually "past-tense" focus on the events of 2020 also allows for a critical perspective and sense of history not necessarily present in journalistic coverage of moments of crisis.

As we gathered behind our individual screens, our original intention was to write a scholarly article that modeled what new social distancing can provide for a collective writing process. This article exists as an archival artifact that documents our uncertainties, analyses, and predictions at the time of its writing in 2020. We allowed ourselves to speculate within the limits of our knowledge with a sense of forward thinking that we left mostly unchanged in this final version of the piece to give a sense of where we were then versus where we are now. Our speculations about lag are grounded in the knowledge that none of these inequalities are new, simply amplified. We offer this piece as an example of our thoughts, feelings, and knowledge true to the moment in which it was written.

We approached lag from diverse fields and backgrounds, but we centered our inquiry in digital studies because we need to understand how things that seem technically embedded, like digital infrastructures, applications, and economies, emerge from things that seem socially abstract, like identity, power, and privilege. We gathered case studies from spring and summer 2020 to analyze the structure of feeling about a newfound pervasive digital lagginess. We analyzed lag as an object of study within digital studies and as a practice.[3] Lag is a metaphor that points toward the frailty and contingency of networks.

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3. Our examples come from who we are. We all work in or attend doctoral programs at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. We write about the neoliberal, profit-driven university's way of leveraging the digital during

The subfield of infrastructure studies has been influential to our approach. It is within such work that we can delimit and analyze "infrastructural imaginaries," or "ways of thinking about what infrastructures are, where they are located, who controls them, and what they do."[4] Such work allows us to lay bare the causes and conditions for who has access to network connectivity today, which is needed to work and learn now more than ever, and who does not. As many countries sheltered in place, and as we wrote this manifesto on shared Google documents, we knew that most people still did not have what they needed to survive in a pandemic.[5] This manifesto is a site of confrontation—to confront our readers and ourselves in all the ways we rely on digital infrastructures during a pandemic, with the goal of awakening a sense of power in relation to our use. This article analyzes the consequences of digital infrastructure's shape and reach during a pandemic and how our current moment has enabled new forms of what we call a "diffuse digital activism" that works in tandem with lag.

Infrastructural lag occurs by falling behind "updates" or technical standards. Not a fast enough download speed from your Wi-Fi connection? That livestream by your favorite band is going to play on your screen painfully slowly. Not enough RAM to play *Civilization VI*? You're going to lag, and Gandhi will likely bomb you anyway. The technical experience of lag can be an enduring reminder of one's class position (being unable to afford cutting-edge broadband) or geographical orientation (being closer to a server can help with your connectivity). During the initial stay-at-home orders of spring 2020, corporate gestures of goodwill addressed these disparities in access by increasing mobile data and internet bandwidth to subscribers.[6] However, these same offerings of "generosity" by data conglomerates have since been quietly walked back. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has demonstrated that these class- and geography-based forms of lag are inextricable from racial logics and histories of racism in the United States. Rather than short-term fixes, we seek a "long-haul politics," a way to create a future together informed by the social lag in which we are mired.[7]

Social lag structures technical lag. Lag existed before SARS-CoV-2, and indeed before our dependency on digital infrastructures to work and communicate. Centuries of labor and resource extraction laid the conditions for the material lags that structure our varied experiences of connectivity today. The US has been built on a structural lag that privileges the freedom of white propertied men by limiting and denying the freedom of others.

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the pandemic, knowing that we are not alone, and that not every place is a university. Writing this manifesto and teaching during the pandemic have shown us that the university is a digital infrastructure ripe for reimagining.

4. Lisa Parks, "'Stuff You Can Kick': Toward A Theory of Media Infrastructures" in *Between Humanities and the Digital*, ed. Patrik Svensson and David Theo Goldberg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 355.

5. Our own access to university resources such as Google Workspace, BlueJeans, and Zoom has further shown to us that we operate within the privilege of an institution that has afforded the tools to write this document collaboratively during a pandemic. Our ability to write this manifesto relies on lag in that we benefit from the structural inequity in distributing infrastructural resources that we critique in this article.

6. See C. Fisher, "Verizon will provide free internet to students in Los Angeles," *Engadget*, March 25, 2020, www.engadget.com/2020-03-25-verizon-free-internet-lausd-students.html.

7. Pato Herbert and Alexandra Juhasz, "COVID's Decompressing Bodies: A Cultural Critique for the Long Haul," *ArtsEverywhere*, July 17, 2021, www.artseverywhere.ca/covids-decompressing-bodies-a-cultural-critique-for-the-long-haul.

The histories of racialized dispossession are present in the staggering and unequal rates of infection and death among Black Americans in the US. At the same time, resentment toward scientific expertise among supporters of former President Donald Trump underlines the gravity of politicizing public health measures during a global pandemic.

An epidemiological lag inherent to white anger during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is a symptom of a larger cultural battleground. Anger among white people who see their disenfranchisement in the enfranchisement of minorities has mutated into a refusal to take measures that would protect the most vulnerable. White racial resentment toward people of color now involves a lag between *their own* refusal to wear masks and the very real effects of the virus *on others*. Denying the reality of the pandemic suggests, therefore, that racialization shapes the asynchronous experience of the SARS-CoV-2 contagion, starkly misaligning the experience of the privileged from those more precariously exposed to the spread of the virus with increased risk of comorbidities, lasting physical and mental impairment, and premature death. The combined vectors of race, geography, and class create health inequities in the disproportionate distribution of comorbidities. Contemporary white anger exacerbates the lag of environmental racism already present in the bodies and life expectancies of minorities in the US, and this anger emerges from and has been endorsed by the highest levels of government.

LAGGING (AND WORKING) FROM HOME

Lag stands at the forefront of our experience as academic workers with regard to labor and to our internal affective economies. Working from home has asked many of us to consider who we are outside of our lives in the workforce. However, the labor of those workers whose jobs require their physical presence—whether highly credentialed, in the case of frontline emergency workers and doctors, or highly exploited, in the case of grocery delivery app contractors—has remained in high demand. Amazon is the biggest economic winner of SARS-CoV-2 and Jeff Bezos, its CEO, is the world's first trillionaire, while the US Postal Service is being actively defunded. Delivery workers are essential parts of the infrastructures of apps like Shipt and Instacart. Whether workers across these just-in-time delivery services work for the world's richest man or for a Silicon Valley start-up, they face a disproportionate risk of contracting SARS-CoV-2.

The level of danger rose for these essential workers, while others refrained from exposure and stepped out of the risk of increased viral transmission. Around the globe, countries not in the overdeveloped part of the world have seen more economic risks to pausing sectors of their economy. Globally, SARS-CoV-2 exposes the seams in a technologically connected world, showing that the many frailties in the global economy were integral structural components all along. Some must lag so that others gain full access.

For those university workers, such as ourselves, who *can* work from home, a brave new world of all video chats all the time has made the management of platforms and the management of emotions major forms of interconnected work. Lag between the smooth, presumably frictionless experience of video chatting and the reality of spotty internet connections creates frustration with digital infrastructure. Despite the perceived

seamlessness of videoconferencing, the virtual waiting room might be a more apt description of our cultural moment, where "latency and waiting . . . have come to define our pandemic lives."[8] Rather than access the high-speed access points in one's life before March 2020 in schools, libraries, or coffee shops, we as academic workers have had to make do with a home connection. Constantly staring at a screen is exhausting and hard on the eyes. With "work" now living within our homes and on our screens, the management of our own labor encroaches ever more stealthily into our waking and dreaming life.[9] Established work habits have changed, and the management of the tidiness of one's digital life and workflow has become imperative. An anxiety of never being "off-the-clock" encourages feelings of having no break or time off. As university workers, we are intimately familiar with anxiety about both lagging and labor, between procrastination and ceaseless work. The affect of lag occurs along a stimulation spectrum: too much Zooming saps all energy and focus for one's life at home; too little Zooming means to completely tune out of social, educational, and work worlds. Being engaged with the ongoing protests of late May and June 2020 also meant being online even more than usual. When every social platform has its own ecology and experience of liveness, a "fear of missing out" or FOMO proliferates digital spaces and creates platform-specific feelings of missing the social experience of liveness with others.

Self-care became an oft-repeated remedy to FOMO and Zoom exhaustion. Near the start of the pandemic, discussions of self-care across social media encouraged giving oneself a break: staying alive during a pandemic was enough. Put down that pen and paper, close the computer screen, and go for a walk. Your lungs will thank you. As time wore on, the first rumblings of a familiar strain of productivity entered back into university life. Universities took up the language of self-care to describe activities that simply reset the machine of university operations rather than supporting a radical restructuring of the underlying demand for productivity. Many universities instituted one- or two-day "well-being" days in place of the traditional, weeklong fall or winter breaks. At our university, the well-being days for undergraduates were framed contrastingly as "deep work days" for graduate students and faculty—opportunities to dive into projects requiring "sustained focus," uninterrupted by the busy work of emails and meetings. Calls for publication proliferated, with the appropriate reminder attached to them that "in these unusual circumstances," authors should not feel compelled to overexert themselves. Expectations of both productivity and *self*-care fell to the individual, at great costs. Universities refused to understand that the hurdles students faced in fall 2020 regarding access, resources, and support were not new issues but older, more pervasive structural problems that have been intensified by the current crisis. Blanket statements such as the University of Michigan's "commitment to care" can only go so far in securing the health of a student body and a community.

8. Neta Alexander, "The Waiting Room: Rethinking Latency after COVID-19," in *Pandemic Media*, ed. Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini (Lüneburg, Germany: meson press, 2021), 26.

9. See Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013).

Despite the lip service to care, the turn away from true self-care and toward productivity forecasted a future intent on speeding away from any lagginess created by SARS-CoV-2. As workers within this system, many of us are habituated to judge our own worth by our productivity. We feel as if we are supposed to be constantly working. In our context of academia, anxiety about being behind has run parallel to the changing texture of university life. Universities run a tight schedule; semester start and end dates are approved years in advance. During the summer of 2020, universities all created lag through varying solutions to questions such as: Would teaching be online or in person? Would student move-in happen, and when? The pandemic has introduced a moment of flexibility within temporalities of education. We argue that new critical purchase can be created in this laggy space. The September 8–16, 2020, strike of the graduate student labor union on the University of Michigan's Ann Arbor campus was one such radical claim to an alternate experience of the pandemic, one in which SARS-CoV-2 testing could be widely accessible and in which the campus police force could be defunded. Summer 2020 also reminded us that the forces of "business as usual" and the determination to reopen campuses to in-person learning enforce another type of lag marked by a continual cycle of premature openings and rushed closings as cases spike and fall. What future do we want for the university?

As the infrastructure of communication has migrated to video chatting with continuously increasing expectations of productivity, experiments with other modes of connection through virtual means have become exciting sources of solidarity. Platforms beyond videoconferencing have proliferated as creative and productive responses to laggy connections. Collaboration through Google docs happened quickly, in various places, in response to anti-Black racism and police brutality—compiling reading lists, sharing scripts for phone calls to municipal governments around the country, and listing articles important for understanding the evolution of #BLM. In spring 2020, a spreadsheet party format emerged for creating community in the banal cell-based spreadsheet environment. The spreadsheet party recreates some of the excitement of the early internet, with the addition of simple images and crudely formatted text boxes.[10] Digital platforms beyond videoconferencing have reintroduced us to modes of community solidarity rooted in protest and nostalgia.

LAGGING BEHIND THE DIGITAL PRESENT: DREAMING A POST-SARS-COV-2 COMMONS

> Now I think the point may be to trail behind actually existing social possibilities: to be interested in the tail end of things, willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless.
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> —Elizabeth Freeman[11]

10. See Marie Foulston, "Party in a Shared Google Doc," *Medium*, May 13, 2020, onezero.medium.com/party-in-a-shared-google-doc-d576c565706e.

11. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xiii.

If working from home in the spring and summer of 2020 introduced lags with regard to the time, texture, and feeling of our labor across digital platforms, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has also reiterated a quality of lag inherent to emerging technologies. Elizabeth Freeman's provocation reminds us of the lag between the emergence of new technologies and their circulation within broader publics, including the already determining social processes of exclusion. Lag lays bare the relationship between the affective and material dimensions of life. Lag is a networking term of art, and lag also affirms what Cathy Park Hong calls a "minor feeling" in cultural production. She argues that "minor feelings are often not featured in contemporary American literature because these emotions do not conform to the archetypal narrative that highlights survival and self-determination."[12] Racism, in particular, produces minor feelings such as "paranoia, shame, irritation, and melancholy," especially when you "hear a slight, knowing it's racial and are told *Oh, that's all in your head.*"[13] Minor feelings index lags between what we experience and what others believe we experience. Just as the map of racism follows the map of the internet, and just as containment strategies of SARS-CoV-2 have encouraged us to tarry in order to create a better future, so too does lag distribute itself unevenly, weaving privatization, precarity, and public feelings together. Platforms like Apple and Facebook have built "false latency" into the user experience to commodify waiting as a way for users to trust that digital infrastructure is working as it should.[14] We position lag as a purposeful latency that instructs us "to trail behind actually existing social possibilities."[15] Lag asks us to slow down in order to build a better commons through digital technologies.

Digital infrastructure fails frequently. And in a social ecology built on this infrastructure, that failure spirals into all arenas of our lives. Shortages, failures, and shortcomings are the SARS-CoV-2 era's hallmark. The pandemic has shifted our ability to work and live our lives. We are all woven into a precarious economy of attention that demands internet and screen time. As scholars in infrastructure studies have told us again and again, digital technologies are anything but frictionless.[16] Cables break, bandwidth lags, and Zoom experiences outages just like the electrical grid. The problems of moving work, play, and school online has revealed the lag between what a capitalist economy encourages us not to worry about (because the *market* is intended to fix all social ills) and the material realities of distribution. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has opened a window onto assessing not only the fragility of global supply chains but also the underlying ideologies that structure the digitization of society. Access to digital technologies has always been uneven, and SARS-CoV-2 has exposed this unevenness even as it has encouraged some institutions to address this lack.

12. Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World), 55.

13. Hong, *Minor Feelings,* 55.

14. Jason Farman, *Delayed Response: The Art of Waiting from the Ancient to the Instant World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 80.

15. Freeman, *Time Binds,* xiii.

16. See Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, eds., *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

Shortages brought on by crises force confrontation. Confrontation reveals inequality. SARS-CoV-2 has revealed that what was "free" or "low cost" is now valuable and expensive. At the same time, what was "valuable" or "expensive" is now free or low cost. Did we think about our ability to purchase toilet paper before we were unable to in March 2020? Did it ever occur to us that, due to material choices in the built environment—from the racialized distribution of housing stock to the provision of internet infrastructure in our neighborhoods—holding a Zoom lecture might be well near impossible in our homes but lightning-fast down the street? SARS-CoV-2 highlights the precarity of our taken-for-granted infrastructure.

We challenge the assumption that we are responsible for our own digital infrastructure. The era of SARS-CoV-2 has been characterized by a radical privatization of goods and services that were previously thought to be the responsibility of institutions. As we all get used to working and teaching online, it is an increasingly radical and impossible gesture to refuse shaming about our messy Zoom backgrounds, slow internet speeds, distractions, and outdated equipment. The history of the social experience of the internet abounds with movements toward individualism where a commons could have flourished. Early communitarians like Stewart Brand worked to build a utopic infrastructure, with bulletin board systems like The WELL, where predominantly white men and women could remake the world to suit their needs for autonomy, privacy, and individualism.[17] The farce of liberal capitalism—what starts as utopian, equitable, and shared turns into privatized spheres of economic individualism—is a common problem of the past and present.

Our affective response to lag produced by "radical privatization" is to create new infrastructures for care and for aid, as laggy as they may be. We can see around us that privatized access to networked connectivity glosses over the cost of infrastructure, that it is really *radical self- sufficiency without support*. If every individual is guarding their own access points to the internet, how can a commons flourish? Unlike countries that subsidize the cost of internet access, the US treats the internet like health care: it shifts responsibility from institutions to individuals. An individual equates to a contract. A contract grants access to networks. Rampant individuality breeds virulent disregard for the things we could share in common. In 2016 New York City partnered with Qualcomm and Google to convert 7,500 of the city's pay phones into LinkNYC kiosks, referred to as "the Swiss Army knife of digital technology support," offering "a USB charger, a WiFi hotspot, phone calls . . . and a web browser."[18] The program failed because it succeeded, but with the wrong users.

The people who needed access to the kiosks the most, the houseless, used them too much. As a result, the converted pay phone terminals were deemed eyesores and shut down. As school districts cycle through reopenings and closures, families with limited

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17. Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

18. Germaine R. Halegoua and Jessa Lingel, "Lit up and left dark: Failures of imagination in urban broadband networks," in *New Media & Society* 20, no. 12 (2018): 4643.

access to computers and Wi-Fi hotspots are also caught in an ethic of suspicion, one that casts blame to those on the edges of the grid and to the technologically underequipped. Digital infrastructure that used to be free (at public libraries) or bundled into other costs (such as college tuition) is now even more of a privatized burden for individuals and for families. Internet networks that run on top of cell service are not adequate for working or learning, nor can everyone afford unlimited data plans. Poor, BIPOC, and young people have always had the least access.[19] In the earliest months of the pandemic, we saw "free trials" of subscription services like exercise apps, yoga apps, and Peloton designed to appeal to an upscale demographic whose members are already hailed as perfect consumers by these companies. What we did not see was the more important kind of support that undergirds access to digital "self-care": free broadband or strong internet provision for families and for the underserved.

The pandemic has allowed us a lens to view the spaces we share in common as sociotechnical infrastructures that support learning in a myriad of small and important ways beyond hallowed university lecture halls. When we talk about what college campuses afford students, we often focus on technology. Universities offer computer labs, fast internet speeds, Wi-Fi networks, and IT support. Internet access at school is designed around fiber backbones designed to carry traffic too expensive for most households to afford. For students and teachers, broadband use can cost as much as a month's rent. From our experiences working with students after transitioning to online instruction in March 2020, however, we noticed that an important affordance of college campuses for them was not only broadband but also space. How can universities proceed so that they accommodate students' varying technological capabilities and need for secure private spaces, alongside a fundamental respect for their privacy? As university surveillance measures have expanded, some students are now forced to take exams under AI and third-party proctors often at extreme invasions of their privacy. The terrain here is rocky, and AI machine-learning bots rendering Zoom audio transcripts scarcely have equity in mind.

"Free" is scarce. This is what the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has taught us so far. Generosity has a time limit and that limit defines a lag between conceptualizing SARS-CoV-2 as a social issue or an individualized one. The infrastructural failures and shortages we experienced did not only render already-existing inequalities visible; they also fostered a reassessment of values and a reinscription of inequality. As academics, we know that limited free access to JSTOR or to digitized books through HathiTrust Digital Library does not make up for the many ways that online resources are inaccessible to those outside of institutions. Working through failures and shortages is not ideologically neutral work. It is tempting to say that SARS-CoV-2 exposed the university system as a broken one, but the university is working in the way it was meant to by tracking along the existing lines of inequality that already existed when campuses were open.

19. See S. Craig Watkins, *The Digital Edge: How Black and Latino Youth Navigate Digital Inequality* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

How, then, do we manage our virtual, material, and infrastructural spaces in a SARS-CoV-2 world where communicating, learning, and living at a distance is required? Instead of trying to achieve all of the richness of face-to-face interactions at a distance, we could instead embrace the limitations of infrastructural shortages in technology, space, and attention in order to conceive new ways of "being there" when we speak to one another.[20]

ESSENTIAL GIGS, ESSENTIAL LIVES

The pandemic is a viral mediation of social life, a heuristic model for understanding how ideas, images, and terms come into being and spread. SARS-CoV-2's transit around the world has revealed society's scars. State and corporate responses to the spread of the coronavirus exacerbate already existing conditions of dispossession and exploitation. The pandemic's racial regime hurts the same groups: it overexposes people of color to both SARS-CoV-2 and digitally mediated, low-waged gig work like grocery and meal delivery. The work-wage relation has not changed since the pandemic began. Capital's need for labor has not abated, but the pandemic demonstrated the extent to which continued accumulation does not need full employment in order to function.

In eras of change, society redefines its new "normal" as calls for productivity supersede calls for social progress. We collectively shift into new and old ideological structures that maintain or exacerbate inequities, by doubling down on forms of consumption without an examination of the types of exploitation needed to maintain them. In this era Big Tech is making out like a bandit. Amazon delivery vans clog the landscape while Instacart deliveries flood the streets. "Essential workers" are forced to expose themselves to SARS-CoV-2 to pay for rent, to pay for internet, or to pay for devices so their children can attend remote classes. Despite widespread, government-mandated "shutdowns" of entire states and countries, "essential" sectors of the economy cannot shift to the digital. People involved in socially critical professions—like food production and distribution, health-care, and sanitation—are precisely those who are at higher risk of exposure and death under pandemic conditions. Within capitalist social formations, it is not the real human beings performing the work that are socially necessary, but the jobs themselves. States and markets are indifferent to the people performing essential work, and this lack of care is made worse by how we devalue the demographics that tend to work in these spaces, including Black people, who are overrepresented among workers who make less than $40,000 per year, and workers who do not have college degrees.[21] These workers are also disproportionately at a greater risk of experiencing unemployment.[22] Race itself is a co-morbidity. To invoke the voices of Ruth Wilson Gilmore and the Combahee River

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20. Lag is a type of glitch, "an error, a mistake, a failure to function," in the words of author and curator Legacy Russell. We situate lag alongside Russell's concept of "glitch feminism." Lag can also be "a vehicle of refusal, a strategy of nonperformance" that can forge new solidarities in the long haul. See Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (New York: Verso, 2020), 7–8.

21. Audrey Kearney and Cailey Muñana, "Taking Stock of Essential Workers," *KFF*, May 1, 2020, www.kff.org/policy-watch/taking-stock-of-essential-workers.

22. Rakesh Kochhar and Amanda Barroso, "Young Workers Likely to Be Hard Hit as SARS-CoV-2 Strikes a Blow to Restaurants and Other Service Sector Jobs," *Pew Research Center*, March 27, 2020, www.pewresearch.org/

Collective, saying that race is a comorbidity means that racialized people are subject to premature death because racism, capitalism, and patriarchy interlock. There will always be bodies, especially racialized, gendered, and impoverished bodies, to replace essential workers who are contracting, and dying from, SARS-CoV-2.

In Michigan, where our lab is based, Governor Gretchen Whitmer's Executive Order 2020–21 mandated that "no person or entity shall operate a business or conduct operations that require workers to leave their homes or places of residence except to the extent that those workers are necessary to sustain or protect life or to conduct minimum basic operations."[23] We take Whitmer's words as an occasion to analyze "work that is necessary to sustain or protect life" and how the digital infrastructure that hypercapitalism built is both its necessary precondition and offers a means for critiquing it. We ask: Who could not do their work at home? Whose work sustains, protects, prolongs, and ensures the lives of others? For whom did the world stop?

Numerous viralities assail the essential worker, just as appreciation for essential workers has gone viral. People have placed signs in their yards, painted "thank you" on their windshields, and posted praise for frontline workers on social media. These thanks are warranted, but are made without regard for whether these workers have a choice between viral exposure or further immiseration under capitalism. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has exacerbated how debt obligations—rent, bills, tuition payments, credit cards—make people into hostage-workers. The risk of breathing in aerosolized virus droplets does not trump the need to go back to work. The essential worker is a "viral hero." "Viral" here refers to the way "hero" arose organically on social media and how these workers' exposure to SARS-CoV-2 increased at the same time. To be a hero is to be positioned within a group that stands apart. "Hero" is a heavily coded term that idolizes certain roles for the courage or nobility that they embody. But the nominal designation of hero is fleeting, and will be stripped from the body when that body exhibits agency outside the control of the national being. While workers can be made heroes temporarily, heroes are never workers, even as they require labor and sacrifice. Workers may adopt agency, go on strike, form unions; heroes cannot.

In times of crisis, when a threat to the production and consumption of commodities places capital accumulation at risk, hero worship is deployed like wartime propaganda. People display posters and banners, put flowers at bus stops, and give knowing nods to those in nursing uniforms in public. Healthcare workers become the recognizable soldiers who keep us safe in the battle against the pandemic. The term "hero" is not used as a signifier of individual achievement, but rather as part of a militarized collective. American society depicts veterans as military heroes who have been stripped of individuality and merged with the embodiment of the nation. To be a hero is to possess a status that is heightened and memorialized, while the individuals who possess this status fade from

fact-tank/2020/03/27/young-workers-likely-to-be-hard-hit-as-COVID-19-strikes-a-blow-to-restaurants-and-other-service-sector-jobs.

23. "Whitmer—Executive Order 2020–21: Temporary requirement to suspend activities that are not necessary to sustain or protect life—RESCINDED," www.michigan.gov/whitmer/0,9309,7-387-90499_90705-522626—,00.html.

collective memory. The soldier is expendable and fungible by necessity. They are meant to be sacrificed so that the production and reproduction of the nation can continue.

When workers are called heroes, they are expected to sacrifice and to be forgotten. Such sacrifice is ripe for co-optation. In some cases this means workers must enforce corporate or state policies in the face of hostile noncompliance. Effectively deputizing employees as police has resulted in increased violence against these workers with fatal consequences. The tragic May 2020 killing of a security guard at a Family Dollar store in Michigan over his enforcement of a mask policy was a stark reminder of the dangers low-wage workers face. In response, corporations have acknowledged this sacrifice, at times, with increased wages.[24] When Kroger gave "hero pay" to its "essential workers," many Americans saw this as proof of corporate goodness. Kroger stepped up in these extraordinary times and visibly provided its workers a living wage. However, two months passed, and when living with SARS-CoV-2 became the new normal, Kroger ended the pay extension.[25] Sustaining workers' material lives was no longer optimal in a moment of revenue insecurity.

The liminal space of the hero exposes the devaluation that laborers have always existed within, and the desire for capital accumulation as the true national icon. As Karl Marx wrote, capital's circuits of accumulation can be understood as "vampire-like" insofar as capital "lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks."[26] The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic brings to light the extent to which this vampire has become a gluttonous god that demands greater devotion in the form of human sacrifice. And, in a racist and patriarchal settler colonial state like the US, these compounding systems of oppression always sacrifice first the marked flesh, those cast out or distanced from the category of the human.[27] As a form of social mediation, the pandemic persists insofar as the rusty gears of the interlocking systems of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy continue to provide a "stock" of victims ready for sacrifice to the vampiric capitalists that collectively hide behind the ruse of the economy.

Essential workers were lionized as heroes as long as they were willing and able to play the part. In March and April of 2020, workers throughout the US faced mounting pressure to act out a facade of normalcy, and allow the economy a chance to heal. Those with concerns about returning to in-person work were seen as purposefully lazy, and were cut off from unemployment benefits. This marked a sharp change in tone from the "hero" rhetoric of earlier months. As businesses continue to reopen despite rising numbers of positive SARS-CoV-2 cases in the US, we need to reckon with the curtailed temporal character of this "hero" worship. The limited duration in which workers' labor

24. Christopher Mele, "2 Fugitives Arrested in Fatal Dispute Over Mask at Family Dollar Store," *New York Times*, May 8, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/us/coronavirus-masks-dollar-store-shooting-flint-Michigan.html.

25. Ann Thompson, "Grocery Store Chain Kroger Is Planning To End 'Hero Pay,'" *NPR*, May 15, 2020, www.npr.org/2020/05/15/857105173/grocery-store-chain-kroger-is-planning-to-end-hero-pay.

26. Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 342.

27. See Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 90.

IMAGE 1. maya (@animarx.crossing), May 16, 2020, www.instagram.com/p/CARILhygFJf/?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet.

was valued was a lag between past and current exploitation. This lag was a temporary dilation of freedom.

To understand work and digital culture as mediated through viral thinking, we turn to a memetic case study of the essential worker's virality. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, a Nintendo social simulation game, was released on March 20, 2020. Arriving as if through divine intervention after the world withdrew into quarantine, *New Horizons* offered a virtual social world populated with cute, toy-like animal characters and a plethora of non-intensive tasks such as farming turnips and flying to neighboring islands to visit one's friends. As the overdeveloped world screeched to a standstill, *New Horizons* offered an escape, a form of physically distanced yet digitally enclosed connection.

As soon as *New Horizons* emerged, so too did @animarx.crossing, an Instagram account that repackaged Marxist criticism by adding text critical of work relations to screenshots of in-game character interaction. The images show how the virtual space of escape was placed in contrast against an increasingly extractive real world. @animarx.crossing's Marxist critique was programmed to be spoken by the animated animals of the game's world to point out the incongruity between designating a "worker," who does a job for money, and a "hero," who does it for love and honor.

These meme-like screencaps from *Animal Crossing* provide visual commentaries on gig work, SARS-CoV-2 exposure, and how "skilled labor" still faces income inequality. They also reveal how well the logic of resource games reflects the affective toil of work today: we seek emotional needs for connection through our laggy infrastructure *and* we use such infrastructure to model the absurdities of our current moment. Why do we turn to *New Horizons* to gamble with our virtual turnip investments, hoping for a fruitful payout that is continually deferred? Why does a Shipt worker make less than a Washington lobbyist, even while one works and the other stays home, or stops working altogether?
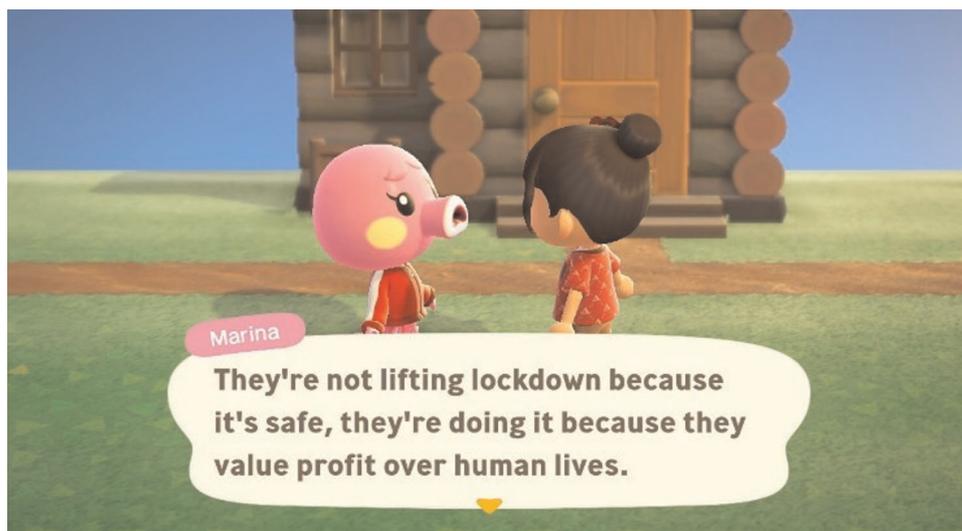
IMAGE 2. maya (@animarx.crossing), May 7, 2020, www.instagram.com/p/B_4ofGdAN4z/?
utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet.

The meme-like visual structure of the @animarx.crossing account mirrors the multiple viralities that we see in the essential work done to sustain lives during this crisis. Memes are uniquely anti-laggy; they emerge rapidly and nonhierarchically as forms of critique, response, and affective engagement. The virality of @animarx.crossing reveals the ambivalence or uncertainty internet users experience while navigating their positions as fungible workers and their tenuous status as heroes. Workers can strike. Heroes cannot. A viral heuristics of lag—reading through the virus's bending and stretching of time—helps us to see how forced labor gets recast as voluntary heroism in order to do increasingly dangerous work. Essential gigs are pandemic-proof. It's easier to hear the truth from Tom Nook and friends in *New Horizons*, where you are unequivocally the hero, than to experience this in your own body, working and dying to make a living during SARS-CoV-2.

PANDEMIC ACTIVISM: INSTAGRAMMING THE #BLM REVOLUTION

In May 2020, another white police officer murdered another Black man, George Floyd, in the streets of Minneapolis. Despite the warnings and fears of gathering en masse during a pandemic, people turned out to protest, and the Third Precinct Headquarters in Minneapolis was burned to the ground. At the same time, the anxieties around SARS-CoV-2 kept many indoors, trying to figure out how to support the rebellions from their devices. Suddenly, digital activism needed to be conceptualized anew, to abandon the notion that it is lazy or laggy. Some realized (or remembered) that digital activism could be robust and powerful.

The pandemic has opened up avenues for conversation and recognition around accessibility, including in the context of protests. Depending on whether we ourselves

are immunocompromised, protesting in person may have fatal consequences. The dangers protestors might subject themselves to are no longer limited to police violence or fascist vigilantes like the "Proud Boys." The dangers are also to our own lungs, suppressed by tear gas, pepper spray, and a virus that attacks the respiratory tract. We can learn from uses of digital technologies by those thought to be on the margins. The adaptations, work-arounds, tinkering, and experimentation in the media history of accessibility are now being "rediscovered" and repackaged as business solutions or "cloud management." As Aimi Hamraie reminds us about accessible teaching during the pandemic, "Disabled people have been using online spaces to teach, organize, and disseminate knowledge since the internet was invented."[28] We must resist the corporatization of caring technologies in the SARS-CoV-2 era by valuing the past—in particular, the embodied technological experience of those who made such innovation possible.

Similar to the histories of accessibility in digital technology, we know that racism has been a structural component of the development of social media.[29] Rather than solely lauding activists who have boots on the ground and relegating all other activism to the realm of the performative and spurious, we must consider how anti-racist activism in digital spaces works and how it can contribute to the unpredictable tides of liberatory social change. What forms and modes of rebellion are tactical and impactful in the digital sphere? What does a digital rebellion look like during a pandemic, even as digital marketing campaigns infect our timelines and our feeds with corporate messages of "care"?

Brands now take moral stances about anti-Blackness online for the sake of legibility and profitability. The pandemic and ensuing global shelter-in-place orders have only hastened and secured a wholesale move toward digital-only discourse between corporations and individuals. Just as the pandemic has further eroded the barrier between the spheres of work and non-work, corporations now act and speak as individuals. The job of social media managers for major corporate brands is nearly impossible: to ensure constant protection of the brand through strategies of fluid identification and disidentification. Their labor has allowed companies to disavow and diminish the actions of prominent CEOs during controversies such as when CrossFit released a statement in support of Black Lives Matter after its CEO Greg Glassman tweeted a racist remark pertaining to George Floyd. Glassman was fired, but the labor of CrossFit's social media managers worked to ensure that the brand's value and identity was preserved. The line between corporate identity and personal identity gets blurred when brands sell our own race, gender, and sexuality back to us as products with cultural capital. How is it possible for a Black Lives Matter–branded mask or shirt to confer racial capital, while being Black or a person of color does not?

28. Aimi Hamraie, "Accessible Teaching in the Time of COVID-19," *Mapping Access,* March 10, 2020, www.mapping-access.com/blog-1/2020/3/10/accessible-teaching-in-the-time-of-covid-19.

29. See André Brock Jr., *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

The intoxicating and exhilarating moments of riotous care that took place in the street became an opportunity for corporations and their vigilant social media personas to share in that moment too. Taco Bell fired an employee for wearing a BLM mask but later apologized when a video capturing the incident went viral. Starbucks designed their own BLM shirts for employees in the wake of reports that a company memo had barred employees from wearing shirts in support of BLM. More and more, the contradictions in corporate responses to social movements become embarrassingly evident.

These performative gestures capitalize on the cultural capital of the moment and dilute the messaging coming out of social movements. This is especially clear in the case of "Blackout Tuesday," the viral trend of posting Black squares to Instagram feeds on June 2, 2020, used to signal support for the protests against police brutality. While a host of brands and influencers participated in the trend out of solidarity, the influx of people using hashtags associated with BLM obscured vital information that protestors were sharing with each other and the public. Even while brands capitalize on a moment of street-level rebellion, and even while we remain unsurprised at the relentless volume of cultural capital that corporations continue to extract, digital users imagine and create methods of rebellion and disruption. After the Dallas Police Department asked internet users to report "illegal" activity at demonstrations in late May, K-pop fans mobilized to spam the Dallas PD's snitch app with fan-cam videos of South Korean boy band BTS to overwhelm and take down the platform.[30] Rather than allow protestors to be swept up in digital surveillance, fans chose to enact digital solidarity that went beyond reposting a Black square to their feed. In the name of defending all protestors, K-pop fans created a tactical lag for the police, forcing them to fall behind. Who knows how many outraged yet hopeful rioters were protected by the deluge of images of K-pop idols? K-pop fans later adopted a similar strategy to disrupt "Whiteout Wednesday," a white supremacist appropriation of the Blackout Tuesday trend.

In contrast to the legions of K-pop fans, specific social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are key bad-faith actors in the Movement for Black Lives, consistently handing over identifying information about their users to the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI in the hopes of catching "violent criminals." As of August 20, 2020, Facebook banned pages of "violent extremists," catching right-wing groups and anti-racist activists alike. The role that these and other corporations play in assisting the state in its repression of protestors cannot be understated. Tech companies' toothless BLM statements emerge from systems that oppress BIPOC, such as the app Nextdoor, a neighborhood social media platform notorious for its users' blatant racism toward BIPOC neighbors.[31] Digital organizing is effective if used tactically, though it can be exceedingly risky when a retweet could lead to a felony

30. Katie Louise Smith, "K-pop fans flood police 'snitch' app with fancams in support of protesters," *PopBuzz,* June 2, 2020, www.popbuzz.com/internet/viral/k-pop-dallas-police-app-fancam.

31. Tarpley Hitt, "These Companies Have the Most Hypocritical Black Lives Matter Messaging," *Daily Beast*, June 4, 2020, www.thedailybeast.com/the-companies-with-the-most-hypocritical-black-lives-matter-messaging-from-fox-to-facebook.

charge.[32] A disruption of social media is possible through a laggy orientation to the timeline and a refusal to abide by the technical and social relations that platforms demand.

CONCLUSION

We have a radical proposal: How can we make our virtual social solidarity *more* laggy, in order to help those forced into a social lagginess in relation to the ongoing pandemic? What new orientations to technology does the lens of "lag" offer? How does the digital enable and require throttling?[33] The network knows how to slow itself down. We have lessons to learn from infrastructure. We have to learn how to lag. We cannot accept that corporations using the affordances of social media to capitalize on social justice movements must always invalidate the work of activists. We insist on revealing the lie of corporate humanity at every turn. We need to locate and fight for humanity outside of the capitalist mythology that has come to define the social media ecosystem. We call for embracing lag as a specific slowing down of an accelerating capitalism. We seek to heal the harm of our working conditions with alternate temporalities of self-care and community care.

As we have discussed, lag as an analytical tool reveals social discrepancies during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The US was built on lag. Freedom is still not universal. Some people experience a surplus of freedom built on the backs of others who experience a profound lack of freedom, a forestalled emancipation that must be made a reality. As readers might recognize in their own families, conversations about race happened *for the first time* in many white households during the summer of 2020, and many communities came out in droves to protest during the uprisings against policing and anti-Blackness. As Pato Herbert and Alexandra Juhasz have deftly summarized, "anti-racism is anti-viral medicine."[34] In the US, emancipation or freedom has historically unfolded asynchronously and nonlinearly across the country and has remained largely incomplete for Black, Indigenous, queer, trans, and poor people. A structural lag thus exists between the future that white supremacists expect and a set of different potential futures—such as a future without police or a future where reparations for slavery is not just a dream but a fact. The twin pandemics of 2020—SARS-CoV-2 and anti-Black racism—have longer roots in the hidden systems that shape the reality of our digital lives. We need a future that builds in positive forms of lag to allow for disruption, care, and repair. ■

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32. See Adi Robertson, "One Tweet Tried to Identify a Cop—Then Five People Were Charged with Felony Harassment," *The Verge*, August 6, 2020, www.theverge.com/2020/8/6/21355999/twitter-cyber-harassment-felony-charges-police-protests-retweet.

33. "Throttling" is a network term that describes when the process of serving information at speed is algorithmically modulated to address weaknesses in infrastructure such as slow switches, worn-down cables, excessive traffic, or outdated hardware.

34. Herbert and Juhasz, "COVID's Decompressing Bodies."