



PHYSICAL, SOCIAL DISTANCING AND SPIKE OF DIGITAL HUMANISM IN COVID-19 WORLD: A SOCIO-PHILOSOPHICAL EXPOSÉ

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Abstract

With the emergence of internet and advanced technology, humanism is gradually becoming digital. But recently in COVID-19 pandemic, there is an ultimate and sudden spike in digital humanism. This is such that promotion of human welfare and humanity through digital technology gained unprecedented momentum not seen in any other time in human history. The factors behind this dramatic rise in digital humanism are yet to be critically addressed by scholars. This paper analytically addresses the catalysts of the present sudden and dramatic spike of digital humanism in COVID-19 world. The study finds that the present surge of digital humanism is propelled by COVID-19 pandemic based on its non-clinical remedies of physical and social distancing. This paper therefore admits that physical and social distancing measures in COVID-19 world spiked online activities and dramatic rise in digital humanism. This is as physical and social distancing measures meant to slow down the pandemic of COVID-19 are globally narrowing people and organisations to the lone option of conducting their works, associations, transactions and interactions via the internet and digital technology. Based on this, this paper unveils the differences and connection between physical and social distancing, and how both measures lead to increased digital humanism in COVID-19 world. Along this line, this study determines the diverse aspects of digital humanism as well as prospective nature of digital humanism in post COVID-19 world. The study then concludes that fear of re-emergence of COVID-19 pandemic and similar diseases, as well as present technological advancement, upgrade and efficiency of internet based organisations and service providers have fully situated humanism on a digital trajectory. As such, prospective humanism in post COVID-19 pandemic world would advance through digital technology than it is presently.

Key words: COVID-19; Digital; Exposé; Humanism; Physical/Social distancing; Socio-Philosophical.

Introduction

Although the dawn of information and communication technology (ICT) propelled digital humanism; its present spike results from physical and social distancing spurred by COVID-19 pandemic (Mexi, 2020). For by first quarter of 2020, many countries have implemented



lockdown; shutting down institutions and activities that require human gathering and bodily contacts which include schools, malls, temples, churches, mosques, offices, airports, and railway stations (Rahul, et al, 2020). Of course, this was in the effort to maximally observe physical and social distancing measures believed to slow down the spread of COVID-19. Physical and social distancing measures therefore compelled individuals, companies, organisations, and employers to implement mandatory lockdown and work-from-home policies through the aid of digital technology. Consequently, every aspect of humanism largely took to digital technological channels where meetings, conferences, seminars, transactions, interactions, relationships, supports, care-giving and social work hold online via internet powered devices. Rahul, et al, attest to this development observing that physical and social distancing meant to slow the pandemic of COVID-19

resulted in most people taking to the internet and internet-based services to communicate, interact, and continue with their job responsibilities from home. Internet services have seen rises in usage from 40 % to 100 %, compared to pre-lockdown levels. Video-conferencing services like Zoom have seen a ten times increase in usage, and content delivery services like Akamai have seen a 30 % increase in content usage. Cities like Bangalore have seen a 100 % increase in internet traffic (2020:1).

With this record similar to the developments in most parts of the world, it indicates that significantly, physical and social distancing lead to massive use of digital information systems and networks in the course of propagating humanism in COVID-19 world. This further means that as physical and social distancing tend to reduce human tangible contacts in order to slow down the rate of corona virus infection; both factors have become outstanding catalysts of increasing online contacts and present tremendous surge of digital humanism (Calbi, 2021).

Based on this, almost all aspects of humanism as pertains to social work are now accessible online through the aid of digital technological devices. For instance, the presence, location and means of accessing available supports, palliatives and action plans towards improving human welfare can now be accessed online via digital technology. Apart from these, the pandemic and its physical and social distancing measures also “forced the world to engage in the ubiquitous use of virtual learning” which has now become an addition to the present increasing digital humanism (Mexi, 2020:1). The reality in all these is obvious: COVID-19 pandemic world recorded a spike in digital humanism and availability of electronic resources towards online activities, learning and experiences. Among these resources, synchronous online conferencing systems, such as Zoom and Google Meet, largely allow people all over the world to join online classrooms and presentations which are still a



propagation of humanism. Commenting on this aspect of digital humanism, Rahul, et al, concur that,

at the beginning of the lockdown, schools, colleges, and universities around the world have shifted their classes to video conferencing platforms like Zoom and Google Meet. Along with these synchronous modes of teaching, asynchronous platforms like edX and Coursera have also seen an increase in enrolments. Some institutions are now shifting entirely to the online mode for the forthcoming academic year, with the exception of sessions that require a physical presence, such as the University of Cambridge in the UK and the California State system in the US (2020:2).

Based on these developments, it stands that digital humanism is now a compelling ideology. This is because it commands a larger coverage via digital technology and revolves on propagating human welfare in all human positive endeavours. But as COVID-19 is seemingly receding in many countries and increasingly posing serious threats in other countries, health experts are in dilemma as regards the possible re-emergence of COVID-19 and similar diseases. As such, global health experts have reserved recommendation for total relaxation of physical and social distancing measures. Hence, the continued spike in digital humanism. And to block the gap physical and social distancing measures might constitute in propagation of human welfare (humanism), internet based organisations (IBO) and network providers have upgraded their technologies to sustain diverse aspects of digital humanism. It is in these contexts that it appears digital humanism now counts among the new world order that has come to stay as a pattern of promoting human welfare (humanism) in post COVID-19 pandemic world.

Conceptual Clarifications

The importance of clarifying the outstanding concepts; COVID-19, physical/social distancing and digital humanism inherent in this discourse is to avoid misnomer that obstructs understanding and knowledge. This reason also extends to setting the limit of these concepts, unraveling the senses in them and creating a better insight into their meanings (Chinweuba, 2019). In line with this aim, COVID-19 is an acronym standing for Corona Virus Infectious Disease 2019.

COVID-19 is a human infectious virus believed to have emerged from Wuhan in the Hubei province of China in December 2019 (De Vos, et al, 2013; Jiang, 2019 and Lipistch, 2020). COVID-19 is also known as Corona virus, and there have been controversies among global stakeholders regarding how it emerged. These controversies notwithstanding, COVID-19 is a disease that attacks human heart, kidney, nervous system, lungs and the entire respiratory system. As such, COVID-19 chokes its victims making them unable to breathe



properly with their respiratory system. Its symptoms are visible in persistent diarrhea, aches, pains, fever, breathlessness, nasal congestion, runny nose, dry cough and sore throat which take six to fourteen days to manifest.

Despite this, victims of COVID-19 are capable of transmitting the disease prior to its manifestation in them. As such, COVID-19 can be asymptomatic in some patients yet the virus still spreads through droplets of saliva and nose discharge from an infected person when s/he talks, coughs or sneezes (Idowu, 2020). This is why Wilder-Smith and Freedman (2020) argue that COVID-19 is transmitted by symptomatic and asymptomatic patients through respiratory droplets that require close proximity of people. Based on this mode of transmission, global health experts hold that COVID-19 is the present pandemic virus that can especially be averted through observation of non-clinical measures of physical and social distancing.

On the issues of physical and social distancing however, these fundamental questions trouble the mind. Is there any difference and link between physical and social distancing? How have both measures spiked digital humanism in the modern world? Physical distancing is indeed a non-clinical measure consisting in avoidance of close contact with another person. It revolves on staying at least two meters away from the other person. In congruence with this view, Mesa, et al (2020), explains physical distancing as spatial distancing, keeping the recommended bodily gap from other people. Physical distancing is thus the abhorrence of physical contacts with other people in public and private spaces. In other words, it refers to maintaining of reasonable space among people in order to avert the transmission of Corona virus (Rubin, 2020). Based on these, it means that physical distancing allows people to physically see, meet, communicate and exchange ideas with at least two meters apart from each other. Physical distancing thus permits human assembly so far recommended gap or space that undermines physical contact is observed. Since physical distancing in COVID-19 world is enforced by governments and state actors, it has gotten new definitions. Many people now view it as non-pharmacological preventive practice employed by diverse governments and state actors to halt the pandemic of COVID-19.

Social distancing, on the other hand, points at “remaining out of congregate settings, avoiding mass gatherings, and maintaining great distance from others and public spaces” (US CDC, 2020). In other words, social distancing bothers more on avoidance of public gathering and public places in order to minimise exposure to contagious diseases, especially Corona virus. As such, social distancing forbids congregating in large groups, remaining out of congregate settings, avoiding mass gatherings, and maintaining distance. Congregate settings in this context include formal and informal gathering that involve large



number of people, crowded public spaces like shopping centers, movie theaters, sports complexes, amusement parks, conference arenas, markets, churches, mosques, shrines, temples, stadiums, airport waiting halls, etc (US CDC, 2020). This is why Wikipedia (2020), teaches that social distancing measures includes the closing of schools and workplaces, restriction of movement of people and the cancellation of mass gatherings. Mesa, et al share this view noting that social distancing connotes “closure of educational institutions and workplaces, cancellation of mass gatherings, isolation of suspected or confirmed cases, quarantine of persons in contact with confirmed cases, stay-at-home recommendations, and even mandatory quarantine in some cities and residential areas” (2020:38). To these, Wilder-Smith and Freedman (2019), add that social distancing point at closing of shops, restaurants and bars, prohibition of public events and imposition of work-from-home (WFH). Based on these meanings, part of maintaining social distancing in corona virus pandemic world extended to closure of schools, clubs, churches, mosques, temples, shrines, markets, grocery stores, shopping malls, restaurants and non-essential work places that attract large number of people (Martin-Calvo, 2020).

Outstanding Differences and Connection Between Physical and Social Distancing in COVID-19 World

From the discourse so far, it stands that social distancing is larger than physical distancing. For it is the practice of keeping more than physical distance from other people. As such, social distancing does not allow people to physically meet and abhors physical public assembly, mass gathering and congregation. Yet, both physical and social distancing are connected on the ground that both are infection control actions prescribed by global public health experts to slow down the spread of a highly contagious disease like COVID-19 (Gillespie, 2020). Both physical and social distancing measures are as well sets of non-pharmaceutical interventions or measures that prevent the spread of contagious diseases like corona virus and its overwhelming challenges on global health systems and facilities.

Moreover, both physical and social distancing are succeeding in slowing down the spread of infection and reducing the intensity of corona virus pandemic, hence their ultimate importance in present global health sector (Kissler, et al, 2020). Their importance is also evident in the fact that both measures prevent transmission of corona virus which is possible through person-to-person contact or person to surface contact that makes it possible for one to inhale infected respiratory and saliva droplets from a patient (Isife, 2021).

Catalysts of the Present Spike of Digital Humanism in COVID-19 World



From every indication, it is evident that physical and social distancing are the factors that lead to increased surge in digital humanism within the COVID-19 pandemic. This is as physical and social distancing affected the normal running of businesses, schools, worship centers, physical contacts and even led to restriction of human movements. In this process, physical and social distancing measures meant to slow down the pandemic of COVID-19 globally narrowed people, institutions and organisations to the lone option of conducting their works, associations, transactions, worship and interactions via the internet and digital technology.

Digital Humanism

Digital humanism however reflects the increasing promotion of human business and welfare through internet powered electronic devices. According to Recke, it is the use of internet powered technology to redefine the way people achieve their goals, to enable people achieve things not previously possible and to propagate the notion “that people are the central focus in the manifestation of businesses and workplaces” (2021:1). Apart from this meaning, digital humanism connotes the ICT powered philosophical and scientific movement premised on the idea that humans have the task to promote human welfare and sustain a happy existence without supernatural supports. Along this lane, digital humanism subsists in internet based “body of philosophies and ethical perspectives that emphasize the value of human beings, individually, collectively, and generally place more importance on rational thought than on strict faith or adherence to principle” (Onyekwere and Uche, 2013:94). Digital humanism is as well a digital intellectual movement that espouses reason, ethics, equity and justice, while specifically rejecting supernatural and religious ideas/doctrines as basis of ideology and decision making.

Apart from these, Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (1937), captures digital humanism as a homocentric or anthropocentric philosophy that anchors on reason but responsive to human welfare and freedom. Digital humanism is indeed powered by ICT, and it propagates human “progressive life stance...ability and responsibility to lead meaningful ethical lives capable of adding to the greater good of humanity” (Omosulu and Inja, 2019:91-92). Thus, digital humanism stands for human interest and the belief that humans are capable of resolving the problems of the world (Mairi, 2020). Digital humanism is therefore an internet based consciousness that project human interest, needs and values at the fore front and gear towards making the world a free, peaceful and better place. Dukor describes it as a “way of life that gives meaning to human life, places man in an outstanding place within the society and universe and gear towards an open society and open mind” (2010:1). From every indication therefore, digital humanism advocates for

the dignity of humans, supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity in line with the social and planetary responsibility. It advocates human rights and social justice, and freed of supernaturalism, acknowledges the existence of humans as part of nature; thereby deriving its goals from human experience rather than theological or ideological abstractions (Omosulu and Inja, 2019:91-92).

Digital Humanism in COVID-19 World

Digital humanism in COVID-19 world derives from tremendous use of digital media. For instance, greater part of social work, education, human relationships, economic transactions, conferences and communication obstructed by physical and social distancing measures were largely rendered through digital means. Digital humanism in COVID-19 world was also glaring in transmission of social work and human existential values that motivate people to work hard and act accordingly. Boahen (2020), attest to this development stating that social workers now use digital technology in initiating, maintaining and sustaining relationships to meet the emotional and therapeutic needs of people who need services. Digital humanism in this context was indeed too visible in the tips on social relationship-based practise and maintenance of social bonds with families and friends.

In fact, digital humanism within the pandemic was also clear in the principles, values and action plans brought to the people in order to protect their lives. This makes digital humanism at this period a genuine professional relationship with people in which respect for people's right to be heard and consent to decisions bothering on their care are upheld.

However, digital humanism in COVID-19 pandemic is advocated through internet based companies like Skype, Zoom, MS Teams, Slack, Google Hangouts, Twitter, Tiktok, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc, through which e-mails, video conferencing, audio interactions, graphic images, text messages, business transactions, virtual learning, etc, and feedback are exchanged with the people. Through these applications, care and compassion for the people are demonstrated, people's needs, how and means of delivering assistance to them are ascertained. Adding to these, strengths-based and asset-based digital humanism was accessible for people to determine what they can do for themselves in COVID-19 pandemic. These applications are also available for accessing community support centers, community resources and care plans. Along this line, the applications are also making identification of online-self management groups, community-based services and support networks accessible.



In COVID-19 world therefore, digital humanism is largely embodying greater human cooperation and social support to slow down the pandemic and cushion its impacts. This is giving rise to positive transnational humanism and solidarity visible in “medical diplomacy where countries have been sending doctors, paramedics, medicines and medical equipment across borders to those countries hit severely by the pandemic and that lacked certain medical expertise and supplies” (Mansouri, 2020:1). Largely therefore, digital humanism is creating the necessary awareness of the challenges of humanity and spurring the real demonstration of more intersected, intimately hyper-connected, irreversibly inter-dependent nature of human globalized world. This notwithstanding, digital humanism continues to advocate international relations, intercultural dialogue, human capacity building and transnational solidarity towards ensuring that humanity is better able to deal with future global crisis and threats.

Along with these, digital humanism now dwells on spurring human resilience and action into future recovery and occurrences (Lambert, et al, 2020). Similarly, digital humanism is also central in orientation of health services, best human health practices and better understanding of best human renovation and improvement of hospital facilities and systems. With the present pandemic therefore, digital humanism have become a consideration of what the virus means for future global planning of hospital services, food supply chains, industry, trade, agriculture, education and human relationship. Relying on the impetus provided by physical and social distancing measures amidst COVID-19, digital humanism now bothers on identifying transformative opportunities towards mitigating future health and economic crises and promotion of human general wellbeing. In other words, digital humanism displays collective glimpse of alternative possible futures and opportunities. Based on these, Yaya, et al (2020), exclaims that physical and social distancing in COVID-19 pandemic period are spiking enduring digital humanism which is fuelling protectionism and displaying real humanism narratives.

Diverse aspects of Digital Humanism in COVID-19 World

Digital humanism in COVID-19 world is not a parochial development. It has taken many fronts supporting and caring for the people and propagating social, economic, religious, political, entertainment, educational and health aspects of humanity. The social aspect of digital humanism in COVID-19 world is visible in lots of online posts towards caring for the people and those in challenging situations, especially the elderly, orphans, widows, disables, diseased, sick, working parents and those who lost their jobs. These online posts has created awareness that led to real world examples of individuals, organisations and governments donating palliatives, equipments and social services in the communities,



delivering shopping to the doorstep of the needy, checking on the elderly, widows, vulnerable, and people in need of support.

Another aspect of digital humanism in COVID-19 pandemic is the online rallying and sharing of fundraisers with larger audience in social media by diverse people and communities. This is in support of organisations and individuals that engage in digital humanism. Adding to this is the digital community discussions that are humanity inclined and sharing of Corona virus issues and challenges. These digital dialogues are helping people to devise and identify innovative solutions to other global social issues affecting human emancipation, social and economic wellbeing. In the context of digital humanism in COVID-19 pandemic, different organisations and individuals are also using digital technology to locate the vulnerable and those in need of support. Along this lane, digital media is being used to create online contents tailored to different people and to offer diverse kinds of support to those in need. Such supports include words of encouragement, free tutorials, tips on stretching, meditation, health, safety, anxiety and depression management, local business, working from home and dance classes.

In the course of the present pandemic, digital humanism is as well being used in picking groceries for individuals who were unable to leave home. Indeed, digital humanism subsists in pictures and videos people share online which transmit their positive experiences to others. Along this lane are also posts that acknowledge the difficult and frightening moment as well as commiseration and overwhelming support to health care workers, corona virus victims, various governments and the entire humanity. Kushner, holds that in this digital humanism, “tone and delivery varied but the message from one user to another remained constant: you are not alone in this, there are silver linings to be enjoyed, and it’s okay to experience this in any number of ways” (Kushner, 2020:1).

As diverse governments are reaching their nationals online with important information that will help them pull through the pandemic, religious institutions are coming with more digital humanism inclined homilies, sermons, exhortations and speeches that serve as catalysts for human emancipation and domination of the universe. Along with these, education sector which is another center of global humanism by means of its advancement of knowledge, technology, critical thinking, etc., has also become digital despite the closure of academic institutions. Thus, digital humanism is being displayed in online learning programmes for students to follow at home. In health sector, some people, organisations, etc., “are already offering psychological assistance via the internet or telephone, and using mobile apps to provide counseling or treatment amid the COVID-19 crisis” (Lai, et al, 2020:1).



Amidst COVID-19 physical and social distancing, digital humanism is also displaying in other ways. In the entertainment and sports industry for instance, is online humanism towards reducing the pandemic of Corona virus. For instance, FIFA teamed up with WHO in launching “pass the message to kick out corona virus” campaign. This online campaign grounded in humanism is led by well-known football players in 13 languages appealing to people to follow the key steps and global action plans towards reducing the spread of corona virus.

Prospective nature of Digital Humanism in post COVID-19 World

Digital humanism at the moment offers indelible hope for new ways of forming and sustaining solidarity and humanism across cultural backgrounds, faith traditions, political divides and geographical borders. Based on its efficiency, effectiveness and convenience, digital humanism has become entrenched in present human existence. It has become deeply embedded in human lives and endeavours such that its dominant presence leaves people with little choice but to use it. This means that digital humanism in its current state have created “a conscious humanity that would be active in self-dialectics (self-consciousness) and self-other dialectics (communal relation and reciprocity)”, hence it will be difficult to go back on its existing trend (Isife, 2020:128). Mexi (2020), recognised this development hence she describes present digital humanism as the genie that is not going back in the bottle.

Truly, the present increment in the use of digital video and audio-conferencing gadgets in advocating humanism have led to lots of positive changes in the network industry to accommodate the future. For instance, lots of multinational organisations have expanded their network equipment and upgraded their technology infrastructure, hard and software to leverage services (Rahul, et al, 2020). These organisations have also invested heavily to account for the present and future surge in digital use, easy global human operations and promotion of human welfare (humanism). In fact, the transformation efforts of these multinational organisations has also become visible in their adoption and upgrade to digital transformation technologies like Cloud, Internet-of-Things (IoT), Blockchain (BC), Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML). These digital transformations are coupled with the humanists’ and global employees’ acclimatisation with the idea of work-from-home (WFH), online meetings, conferences and transactions. Based on these developments, it appears certain that digital humanism is now a norm that will exist in the unforeseeable future (Akala, 2020).

Another rationale behind existence of digital humanism in post COVID-19 era lies in the efficient managerial advantage it offers. This advantage is visible in the fact that digital



humanism makes it easier and faster for humanism to be monitored, supervised and managed. It also makes it easier for humanists to efficiently report the state of their work to their sponsors, donors and the general public. Awareness of this advantage increases the quality of humanism even as it has led to increased human and “technostress” (Ayyagari, et al, 2011:1). These stresses stem from the fact that humanist volunteers or “employees have to learn technologies and be available for work, staying with digital devices all the time, endure work pressure and cope with multi-tasking (Rahul, et al, 2020).

The permanency of digital humanism in post COVID-19 world is also showcased by the present perplexity of global health experts. This worry is glaring in their contemplation of the possibility of emergence and re-emergence of other epidemics and COVID-19 pandemic, respectively. As such, global health experts are reserved in recommending slow relaxation of physical and social distancing measures. The worry and reserved positions of these global health experts remains a pointer to the fact that digital humanism will continue to an unforeseeable future as a pattern of work for post pandemic humanists.

Outstanding Disadvantages of Digital Humanism spike in COVID-19 World

Outstanding among the disadvantages of digital humanism spike in COVID-19 world is its renewal of the idea of community and solidarity (Bietti, 2020). This means that at the time when social ties need to be tangibly rebuilt, digital humanism is accelerating the digitisation of human society. Along this line, it is forcing humanistic and other activities into the virtual sphere. Based on this, people are increasingly reliant on internet services for work, community and social interaction. This is affecting the normal human relation built on blood, kinship and cultural ties. Sadly, this renewal is being propelled by the privately owned internet platforms leaving people with little or no say in the whole change.

Another disadvantage in this context is that spike in digital humanism brought a surge in online fraud and scam. Fraudsters and scammers now pose as care-givers and human support organisations exploiting and extorting money and information from unsuspecting and vulnerable public. Indeed, this dire development, according to Agarwal, et al, (2017), makes digital humanism in post COVID-19 pandemic a work space that requires serious cyber security.

Conclusion

From the discourse so far, it is indubitable that physical and social distancing in COVID-19 pandemic brought a tremendous surge in digital humanism. But with digital humanism, humanity is now more spurred to further ingenuity that increases human welfare and promotes global humanity. This ingenuity is most visible in the present COVID-19



vaccines and action plans that slow down the pandemic of COVID-19. It thus means that physical and social distancing measures paradoxically obstruct humanism but end up spiking its digital dimension which now holds a wider coverage and maximally promotes human welfare. Along this line, digital humanism now emboldens humanity and set humanism towards a better elevation of human dignity, provision of human needs and confrontation of subsequent global crisis and threats. This surge in digital humanism propelled by COVID-19 physical and social distancing measures is also a pointer to the philosophical fact that problems beget critical thinking and fervent solutions that result in numerous human ingenuities and inventions.

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