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The digital void of voluntourism: Here, there and new currencies of care

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the ways in which "care" is being transformed in response to the mediatory role of digital technologies. Digital mediation has caused care to become an increasingly cross-border practice, and a more expansive construct, that destabilises the assumption of presence ("here") and absence ("there"). Indeed, as the physical and digital merge into one integrated way of being in the world, they enable connectivity across geographical distance, but so too can they create emotional distance within situations of geographical proximity. These outcomes reflect the "digital void" within which caregivers, and society more generally, are implicated. Digital voids are created when individuals immerse themselves within, and become responsive to, digital networks of connectivity, distraction and representation that can implicate the beneficiaries of care, their family and friends, and themselves as well. We illustrate these ideas through an empirical analysis of Singaporean voluntourists, who are shown to actively reproduce digital voids when engaged in volunteer projects overseas. Specifically, we explore the space-times of the digital void, the representations of "care" in a digital world, and how (dis)connectivity can foreground the (un)doing of care.

1. Introduction

Care is an increasingly cross-border practice that occurs independently of the space-times that bind people to place. As a result, practices of caregiving have responded to the 'vanishing of distance between what was "proximate" or "at home", and what was "distant" or "away"' and have recalibrated the terms of 'who we should care for or not' (Sin 2014: 145). Technological advances have enabled these shifts. They have brought about greater awareness of differences and inequalities at the global level; new patterns of mobility, agency and the capacity to act at the individual level; and an expansion and reconfiguration, therefore, of the supply of, and demand for, care. Altogether, these factors have contributed to the emergence and popularity of volunteer tourism (or "voluntourism"), which involves travelling to encounter and engage with relatively disadvantaged people and places. In offering opportunities for people to travel and provide 'care for the 'distant stranger'' (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011: 554; Raghuram 2012; Sin and Minca 2014), voluntourism has become 'one of the fastest growing niche tourism markets in the world' (Mostafanezhad 2013a: 485). Yet, whilst it is often assumed that the motivation to "volunteer" foregrounds a degree of selflessness in structuring the terms of engagement, this may not always be the case. Just as individuals might be motivated to participate in voluntourism projects because of the opportunity to access communities that are *more* disadvantaged, and to therefore make a *greater* impact, so too can the distinctions between "volunteering" and "tourism" become blurred. Blurring complicates the assumption of "care" that underpins volunteering. Complicating it further is the role of digital connectivity in mediating the voluntourism experience. Mediation causes acts of care to become indexed to their representational value in the digital domain, potentially reducing them to 'empathetic gesture[s] of commoditized concern' (Mostafanezhad 2014: 111).

With these ideas in mind, this paper brings voluntourism, and the geographies of care more broadly, into conversation with the digitally mediated ways in which caregiving is now practiced, performed and politicised. In view of the fact that 'digital technologies have become pervasively quotidian' (Ash et al. 2018: 26), there is a need to explore the ways in which care is being recalibrated in a digital age. Our argument is that digital technologies complicate practices of caring by causing assumptions of presence ("here") and absence ("there") to become destabilised as the physical and digital merge into one integrated way of being in the world. Whilst integration can result in greater, or more seamless, connectivity across geographical distance, so too can it also create emotional distance within situations of geographical proximity. These outcomes reflect the "digital void" within

which voluntourists are implicated, and which they help to reproduce. Digital voids are created when individuals immerse themselves within, and become responsive to, digital networks of connectivity, distraction and representation that implicate the beneficiaries of care, their spatially dispersed social networks, and the voluntourist themself. Digital immersion causes "care" to become a more polyvalent construct, which relates both to volunteering practices, but also the need to constantly share the voluntourist experience through visual representations circulated amongst social networks. The digital void thus comprises what Laurie and Baillie Smith (2017: 100) describe as a "hidden geometry" of volunteering that emerges when 'the fixed geographies of giver and receiver… become weakened, opening possibilities for the negotiation of roles in ways that problematise existing ideas of development and agency'. It provides a conceptual vehicle through which we can 'develop ways of thinking through our responsibilities toward unseen others – both unseen neighbours and distant others – and to cultivate a renewed sense of social interconnectedness' (McEwan and Goodwin 2010: 103).

The contributions of this paper are threefold. One, it helps expand the emerging field of "digital humanitarianism" by bringing it into conversation with the everyday digital practices of voluntourists. Through empirical exploration of these practices, we problematise the view that humanitarianism is about 'paying moral attention to others who are beyond one's own sphere of existence' (Tester 2010: vii). Instead, we show how digital connectivity, and by extension, digital voids, can cause "spheres of existence" to become unbounded from place, causing the focus of "moral attention" to become more nebulous, reactive, and sometimes selfish, constructs. Two, by bringing the perspective of digital mediation to bear on the ways in which care is practiced by voluntourists, we contribute to the ongoing expansion of the geographies of care by reinterpreting 'distance, or the ethics arising out of a sense of responsibility towards those with whom we have caring relationships and toward different and distant others' (McEwan and Goodwin 2010: 103; Raghuram et al. 2009; Milligan and Wiles 2010; Raghuram 2012) in a more relative light. Digital connectivity enables this relativisation. It causes people to straddle the here and there, and to maximise the value of in-betweenness through practices of "digital arbitrage". Digital arbitrage is when individuals mediate between the different forms, registers and attributions of representational value provided by the real world and digital domain, the aim being to elevate their social position. Three, our empirical analysis draws on the practices of young Singaporean voluntourists, and other stakeholders implicated in Singapore's humanitarian-cum-tourism industry. Singapore's education system mandates that all students participate in community service projects, meaning practices of volunteering can be prescribed, and influenced by other motivations. Also, many young Singaporeans are digitally dependent, meaning they can provide insight into the new currencies of care that emerge through digital mediation.

Three sections follow. The first explores the ways in which tourism, volunteering and care intersect in a digital age, and what this means for individual agency and responsibility. The second considers the emergence of "digital voids" in response to the arbitraging practices of digitally connected individuals. The third explores the space-times of the digital void, how "care" is represented in a digital world, and how digital (dis)connectivity can foreground the (un)doing of care. We conclude by identifying opportunities for further research.

2. The uneasy alliance of tourism, volunteering and care in a digital age

In a general, yet increasingly problematic, sense, an ethic of care usually underpins the desire to participate in voluntourism. Indeed, implicit within the *idea* of volunteer tourism is that people travel to bring about positive effects for the communities they work with (see Sin and He 2018: 3 for a review). This idea is both enforced and complicated by the fact that voluntourism projects are often based on relatively long(er) time horizons, and involve 'more intimate' (Sin 2010: 983; Conran 2011) or 'compassionate' (Mostafanezhad 2013c: 326) forms of engagement with local communities. The extent to which local communities are the only beneficiaries of such practices has, however, come under critical scrutiny in recent years (see Wearing et al. 2018: 502 for a review). In particular, the contradictions embedded within the notion of intimacy have been identified and explored. In turn, this has caused the ethic of "care" to become a more expansive, less unidirectional, and sometimes more self-motivated basis for engagement. In particular, Sin and Minca (2014: 96) assert that voluntourists are implicated in an 'imbroglio of detachment and involvement, of paternalistic protection and mutual exploitation, of generosity and hospitality, but also of corruption and self-interest'. These self-interests have been identified in relation to self-development and career progression, opportunities for new experiences associated with visiting less-accessible destinations, the social (re)positioning of the self, and so on (Sin 2009; Baillie Smith et al. 2013; Sin and He 2018). Yet, as much as the ethic of care has been seen to expand in meaning, how the digital mediates these practices remains underexplored. The two subsections that follow identify, first, the role of individual agency in practices of popular humanitarianism (of which voluntourism is one manifestation); and second, how articulations of agency are expanded and problematised through the digital domain.

2.1. Popular humanitarianism and the agency of the individual

Voluntourism is one form of "popular humanitarianism" – an idea that encapsulates a variety of everyday choices, practices and attitudes that have, in recent years, taken root in advanced societies around the world. The popularity of "popular" humanitarianism is itself a reflection of the structural inequalities that continue to (re)produce socio-economic differences around the world. Popular humanitarianism has become a public narrative that concerned individuals can engage with, participate in, and thus contribute to through various practices of "giving back" (Sin 2009; Chen and Chen 2011; Mostafanezhad 2013b). Practices of alternative consumption (of which voluntourism is an example) and the emergence of "alternative commodity cultures" such as Fairtrade and REDD+ have enabled individuals to extend care over longer distances. Yet, with extension comes the problem that such practices are 'hardly about behaving in a systematically different manner that might substantially alter the political or economic status quo' (Bryant and Goodman 2004: 349). The point, however, is that individual agency – defined here as the ability to influence certain outcomes – has become embedded within everyday acts of humanitarianism. In turn, this has caused humanitarianism to become a trope through which the individual, and the image of the compassionate self, can be (re)produced. Mostafanezhad (2013c: 332) extends this idea further by showing how celebrities like Angelina Jolie and Madonna have become implicated in the discourse, creating a

> theatre of popular humanitarianism [in which] the 20 something female has taken center stage. Young women around the West – and increasingly throughout Asia – have taken up international development and humanitarianism. As celebrity's most allegiant audience, young women have dutifully appropriated this role where they comprise more than 80% of all volunteer tourists. While these parallels may seem immaterial, for millions of stargazers in the West, celebrity humanitarianism may be the only form of humanitarianism that they will ever engage with.

Celebrity involvement reflects the popularisation of humanitarianism, causing humanitarian projects to become a "theatre" through which the humanitarian practices of celebrities can be "dutifully appropriated", and the compassionate self performed. Also highlighted here are the gender, racial, geographical and (implicitly) class biases of popular humanitarianism. These biases underpin feminist critiques of popular humanitarianism, which emphasise how practices like

voluntourism are implicated in the 'discursive construction of binary hierarchies' (Wearing et al. 2018: 501). They can, as a result, be seen to 'intensif[y] and extend neoliberalism through the privatization and commodification of development and global justice agendas' (Mostafanezhad 2013c: 321). Ironically, as much as voluntourists construct binaries and extend neoliberalism, so too are they implicated in broader structures of commodification and exploitation. Wearing et al. (2018: 502) go so far as to suggest that voluntourism has become a 'fully commodified experience where both hosts and tourists become exploited forms of labour and capital'. In this view, popular humanitarianism enables the expression of individual agency, but so too can these expressions be moderated by the structuring logics within which, and through which, it is expressed. Whilst the logics articulated here are economic in nature and neoliberal in effect, the inflections of digital technologies provide another set of structuring logics that have resulted in the 'digitally-enabled constitution of everyday humanitarians' (Schwittay 2019: 1921). These constitutions have, in turn, led to an expansion of individual agency and responsibility.

2.2. *Expanding agency and responsibility through the digital domain*

Many of us now live digitally mediated lives that are defined by a lack of distinction between the "digital" and the "non-digital". These mediations enable, amongst other things, greater connectivity and the associated expansion of agency and responsibility. The digital, then, both reflects and further reproduces the idea that we 'no longer inhabit coherent bounded social contexts for which we have a persuasive lexicon' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003: 152). Instead, we are put into situations in which we must constantly negotiate the need to be "here" (in an embodied and emplaced sense) and "there" (in a digitally connected and *dis*placed sense). These negotiations have important implications for the understanding of care, as the digital domain provides alternative spaces and methods for the practice of caring. Caring remains rooted in bettering the socio-material conditions and opportunities of people and places – often through relational acts of goodwill or benevolence – but its *value* becomes more expansive through the digital domain. Digital mediation causes care to become a more morally ambiguous construct that can be leveraged for its representational value, and the associated potential for the social (re)positioning of the caregiver in a more positive light. In this sense, care becomes a new form of "currency" that can be leveraged in ways that are more self-directed than often recognised. As currency, the benevolence of care can be obscured by the desire to portray the "caring self" to one's social networks, sometimes in ways that might detract from, or otherwise undermine, the physical and emotional act of care*giving* to beneficiaries.

Whilst there have been efforts to 'explore the nature of caring practices online' (Atkinson and Ayers 2010: 83; Kong and Woods 2018; Woods and Kong 2018), these discussions have not yet been brought into conversation with discourses of popular humanitarianism. However, doing so will lead to more sustained interrogation of how both agency and responsibility can be expanded through the digital domain, causing them to become more complex constructs. Recently, Laurie and Baillie Smith (2017: 95) noted the need for expansion, lamenting how 'existing geographies of volunteering and development have produced fixed understandings of agency and experiences in diverse contexts'. The problem of fixity reflects Sin's (2014: 124) earlier insight, that

> responsibility is… a place-based idea. This makes responsibility a navigational challenge for those – like tourists and other consumers in the global economy – who live their daily lives outside of the place-based contexts in which their responsibility is being articulated and enacted… "Being responsible" seems to signify a certain way of being, of conducting oneself in a particular way, a way marked by certain recognizable signs and reinforced by specific codes.

Digitally mediated lives are, however, predicated on increasingly deterritorialised experiences of people and place, which in turn has implications for the ethic of care upon which popular humanitarianism in general (and voluntourism in particular) is based. Not only can digital media be used to 'generate understanding of global issues and inequalities' by 'reproduc[ing] visions of compassion and empathy' (Sin and He 2018: 4), but so too can they cause practices of "responsibility" to become embedded within broader representational logics associated with digital connectivity. This can lead to a conflation and obfuscation of what is "responsible" and "irresponsible" practice. Specifically, to the extent that "responsibility is… a place-based idea", digital connectivity causes individuals to be plugged into – and therefore responsible to – multiple place-based people and practices at once. In more concrete terms, this means that voluntourists are implicated in wide-ranging webs of responsibility. They are responsible to the local communities with which they are working, but so too are they responsible to their networks of friends, family members and followers that participate in the voluntourism experience with them, albeit from afar. Digital connectivity thus causes 'new transnational communities of sentiment [to] emerge' (Mostafanezhad 2017: 70) that are physically rooted in the theatre of voluntourism, but which reach out to, and are often reproduced by, the geographically dispersed webs of attention and (self-) representation that voluntourists contribute to. These webs are ongoing sources of distraction, and lead to the emergence of what we term "digital voids".

3. Towards a conceptualisation of the digital void

Digital voids are an outcome of the digitally mediated lives that many of us now lead. As Miller and Slater (2000: 5) observed two decades ago, 'we need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces… they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness'. The concern here is that the digital world is treated in analytically distinct terms from "social spaces", and that the idea of a "cyberian apartness" is in fact an illusion. Research has since responded to these concerns, and has offered more integrated understandings of digitally mediated lives. However, in a world defined by constant digital connectivity and, in many respects, dependence, there is a need to push the idea of integration further. Digital voids are a symptom of the increasingly networked self. This is a self that is immersed within, and therefore responsive to, webs of geographically dispersed contacts and audiences. As such, the digital void emerges when we are digitally connected, and are therefore positioned *inside* the void. In such cases, physical presence can be nullified by digital immersion and distraction. Indeed, the extent to which the individual is immersed within the void has a number of space–time and emotional contingencies that reflect, for example, the "newness" or novelty of experience, or the (un)willingness to engage with the real world. Digital *dis*connection places individuals *outside* the void, which, for those used to pervasive digital connectivity, can be an uncommon and unsettling experience, and can trigger feelings of withdrawal or anxiety. When people are overseas, and especially when they are engaged in voluntourist projects, the dialectical interplay between digital connection and disconnection can become more self-reinforcing, nuanced and ethically ambiguous as well.

Conceptually speaking, the digital void problematises the idea of "presence", which has important implications for the practice of voluntourism. Speaking of tourism in general, Minca (2010: 94) suggests that the appeal of travel is the 'ambiguous relationship that the tourist has with the external world, a relationship based on an intriguing combination of segregation and 'being in place''. The ambiguity of this relationship becomes more complex in the context of voluntourism, as care intervenes to create expectations surrounding behaviour, attitude and intent. Whilst it has been shown that 'care can be socially and emotionally proximate… even at a physical distance' (Milligan and Wiles 2010: 736) digital voids can reverse this logic, creating distance, despite proximity. Thus, as much as the 'developing world is often

portrayed as a "distant other" that one ought to care or be responsible for' (Sin 2010: 984), digital connectivity has brought about the emergence of a "distant self" that exists at the nexus of presence and absence. Digital voids therefore provide a conceptual tool that can be used to explore and understand the

> apparent tension between the messy world of place-based experience – where being a responsible volunteer tourist is difficult, frustrating, and fraught with setbacks, inefficiencies, and failures at the same time that it is rewarding and potentially life-changing – and a more abstract world of ideals, mediated representations, and knowledge production (Sin et al. 2014: 124).

The tension that Sin evokes is a function of voluntourists being located at, and thus having to manage, intersecting webs of digital and physical social relations and expectations. Whilst digital voids emerge when digital networks are privileged, the real world is needed to provide stimulus and material for the "mediated representations" of the digital. Switching back and forth between them – forging connections, creating media, sharing them online, (re)presenting the self – is a form of digital arbitrage that reflects the desire for individuals to try and maximise their position within these intersecting webs (Woods 2020a). This desire is rooted in the idea that 'the "self" is continually performed both externally to one's audiences… and internally to strengthen one's self-identity' (Sin 2009: 491). Strengthening stems from the ability of individuals to move back and forth between the real and digital domains – between "here" and "there" – by posting content online in the hope of engaging dispersed content consumers. By advancing an understanding of digital arbitrage, we seek to expand existing geographical engagements with arbitrage thinking. These engagements focus on migration, and explore how "geoarbitrage" has become a lifestyle strategy that involves relocating to a country with a lower cost of living (see Woods 2019: 9 for a review). Like this work, our expansion is premised on the opportunities and empowerment that movement can give rise to. However, our focus is on movement between the digital and real worlds, which in turn enables an image of the caring self to move from "here" (the site of voluntourism, or object of representation) to "there" (the digital domain, or wherever followers are based). Indeed, the relative representational *value* of "here" is maximised by capturing and posting it online. Doing so moves it "there", which ideally results in the voluntourist being positively repositioned within their social networks.

In the context of voluntourism, these behaviours contribute to the emergence of digital voids. During voluntourism projects, the uniqueness of experiences and encounters with difference lead to situations in which 'an aesthetic of attachment develops as participants create narratives around a shared experience' (Conran 2011: 1460). Yet, whilst Conran speaks here of attachment to other volunteers and the beneficiaries of caregiving, digital connectivity means the idea of attachment extends through individuals' social networks, which need to be supplied with images, updates and other representations of the caring self. In this sense, pre-existing notions of distance in socio-spatial relations can be disrupted when recalibrated from the perspective of digital (dis) connection (Raghuram et al. 2009; Raghuram, 2012). Put another way, digital arbitrage occurs when individuals are constantly connected, and responsive, to people that are both "here" and "there", with these connections providing the inputs and channels needed to cultivate an image of the caring self. We now illustrate these ideas by exploring the digitally mediated practices of "care" exhibited by Singaporean voluntourists.

4. Here, there and new currencies of care

Singapore is a relevant, if idiosyncratic, empirical context in which our notion of the digital void can be developed and applied. It is a country in which digital penetration is exceptionally high, with most young Singaporeans relying heavily on digital technologies to augment their everyday lives (Woods 2020b). It is also a country in which community service has, in recent decades, become enshrined in the education system. In turn, this has caused it to become a prescribed way to instil in young Singaporeans a sense of caring for communities, and to promote an ethos of 'individual autonomy, improvement and responsibility' (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011: 545). Whilst some Singaporeans respond to such prescriptions in a positive way, many others use these experiences as a means to enhance their CVs by developing and demonstrating evidence of soft skills (especially leadership, international exposure and intercultural sensitivity) to prospective employers (Baillie Smith et al. 2013; Woods and Shee 2021). In response, many educational institutions' community service programmes have become increasingly international over the years. This can be seen as both a reflection of these more pragmatic underpinnings, as well as Singapore's emergence as a regional hub for humanitarian agencies and programmes. Sin (2009: 484) explains in more detail how

> the rise of overseas volunteering expeditions from Singapore was propelled by two developments, the first being a compulsory community involvement programme implemented by the Ministry of Education in Singapore for all pre-tertiary schools in 1997. This has created a greater awareness of the value of community involvement and is now seen as part and parcel of a student's education. The second related development is the creation of Youth Expedition Project (YEP) in 2000, under the non-government organization (NGO), Singapore International Foundation (SIF, from 2000 to 2005), and subsequently managed by the National Youth Council (NYC) since 2005.

To better understand how such prescribed practices of "care" intersect with the digitally mediated lives of young Singaporeans, we conducted twenty semi-structured interviews in late-2019. Whilst the interviews were mostly with Singaporean students in their early or mid-twenties who had participated in overseas volunteering programmes (fourteen interviews), we also conducted some with Singaporeans that worked for both non-governmental, and government-linked, organisations that organised and managed overseas volunteer trips (six). Of the "participant" cohort, four interviews were with students from a local university who, to fulfil the requirements of their degrees and thus graduate, had to complete at least eighty hours of community service. Participating in overseas volunteering programmes was widely believed to be the most efficient way of completing this requirement, whilst also bolstering their CVs. The other ten interviews from the participant cohort were with students (or recent graduates) from another local university, who did not have to fulfil the same community service requirements, meaning their participation in overseas volunteering programmes was self-directed. The sample reflected a range of volunteering projects, from teaching English and entrepreneurship skills (most common), to bicycle maintenance and the construction of homes, schools and playgrounds. Southeast Asian countries – notably Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam – were the most likely destinations, but a few participated in projects in countries located further away – such as China and Nepal – which were deemed more "exotic", and to hold greater representational value. Assertions of value like this reflect the extent to which tourism provide a motivation for volunteerism. Despite the range of projects and countries included in the sample, it was surprising how similar the experiences of many of our participants were. In itself, this suggests that the structuring logic of the digital void might, to a certain extent, contribute to the homogenisation of real-world experiences.

Interviews lasted 45–60 min, and were conducted by either one or both of the authors. For the participant cohort, the interviews sought to understand how digital technologies were used to augment, or obstruct, the volunteering experience, and the politics that emerged as a result. For the administrator cohort, we sought to understand how digital technologies were used to raise funds, attract people to participate in volunteer tourism, and document the experience of their participants.

All interviews were audio recorded, fully transcribed, and analysed and coded for themes as soon as possible after completion. The three subsections that follow present a distillation of these themes; they explore the space-times of the digital void, the ways in which "care" is represented in a digital world, and how digital (dis)connections can foreground the (un)doing of care.

4.1. Space-times of the digital void

Many young Singaporeans are used to constant digital connectivity. As a former employee of Singapore's National Youth Council explained, "this generation is growing up very differently. I mean… the documentation of their lives is very important, and it becomes part of them… it's uncommon to live your life undocumented… they're digital natives". The "documentation" of which he speaks underpins the representational practices of voluntourists, and, by extension, the ways in which they demonstrate care. Xuan[1], an undergraduate student who participated in volunteer projects in Cambodia and Indonesia echoed this sentiment, recalling how "the first thing when we touch down… is to find where we can buy SIM cards… you want to connect to Instagram, take photos of where you are, what you're doing, what you eat". As a result, *not* being digitally connected can be unsettling. Diyana, an undergraduate who participated in a volunteer project in Sumatra, Indonesia, explained in more detail how "we weren't prepared. I think the theme of us living not connected… [created] a bit of loss… [our] phones are a sense of security". Volunteering overseas, can put young Singaporeans in situations where the digital becomes, sometimes for the first time in their lives, inaccessible. Yet, as much as they would experience the "loss" and "[in]security" of disconnection, so too did it encourage them to seek out ways to digitally reconnect. Through *re*connection, then, access to the digital void can become a distraction from their volunteering, thus obstructing closer and more meaningful engagement with the "here". Xuan explained the dialectic of disconnection and reconnection well:

> I guess it [digital connectivity] disrupts the purpose of why we are there… [Being there is] a social media detox. You disconnect to connect. It just seems like they're so attached to social media, it makes it hard to talk over meals, because when we have meals, all we want to do is use our Instagram.

Xuan's frustration stems from the ways in which volunteers negotiate the here and there, creating digital voids in response. Jason, an undergraduate student who organised and led a volunteering trip to the Philippines, echoed these frustrations, but went further in explaining how digital voids were used as a coping strategy to manage the burden of responsibility that comes from having to engage with communities that they may not, in reality, care that much about. In many respects, this is a reflection of the prescribed nature of community service work in Singapore. Jason told us how:

> You see students, participants, start to isolate themselves, and using social media… Students tend to drift away very easily… A lot of people are doing it just to update the world on what they're doing, and I don't think that's a very good thing to do. You should be focussing on what you're doing here.

Whilst the "isolating" and "updating" practices that Jason identifies above are processes of abstraction – of volunteers mentally removing themselves from the physical environment – the digital void also manifests in more tangible ways. Jason went on to explain how, in the village in which they were working in the Philippines, "the service is quite erratic, it's not stable all the time" which means that "if you're in school, you can't really access social media unless you go to some [place] that has access". Digital voids thus have specific space–time configurations, the identification of which would see volunteers congregating in particular places (in this case, the smoking area of the school) in the search for digital connectivity. Haziq shared a similar experience of how, in Aceh, Indonesia, "we encountered some conflict within the team, as our project directors decided they didn't want to give out SIM cards to everyone". In this case, the forced digital disconnectivity through the selective allocation of SIM cards was to minimise "distractions". Proactive measure like these were designed to encourage volunteers to serve the purpose for which they decided to participate in the trip; that is, to engage with local communities in an action-oriented and place-based way. Through an understanding of the digital void, however, acts of caring must be reframed and resituated within broader webs of representational practices.

4.2. Representations of "care" in a digital world

As a performative and representational practice, the idea of "care" changes in a digitally mediated world. Notably, it can become a more visual, and a more self-fulfilling construct. Many of us are in a constant state of "betweenness" whereby the digital always distracts us from the real world, whilst the real world provides the stimulus for our representational practices online. Switching between these roles foregrounds the extraction of representational value, whereby we constantly seek to maximise the value of distraction and stimulus. Simply put, when we are experiencing something new and different, we are more compelled to take photos and record these experiences. When we are experiencing something mundane and everyday, we are more compelled to spend time servicing our digital networks and responsibilities. Practices of documentation are implicit, causing voluntourists to have to negotiate between caring for the communities they are meant to serve "here" and their social networks "there". Beyond positioning, these practices can also become problematic when analysed in relation to the acts of care that voluntourists participate in. An example shared by Ming when she participated in a housebuilding project organised by Habitat for Humanity in Cambodia reveals some of the problems of representing care in a digital world. She began by telling us how, during the project the *act* of care became inverted with the representational *value* of care. In her words:

> We were there digging for hours. I would say that you wouldn't really have the mentality that you are, like, caring for the community, because all you think of is just 'this is damn tough, like, can I just take a break to get a water and stuff?'

The physical exhaustion experienced through the act of "care" distorted the idea of what caring actually means. Instead of "caring for the community" she went on to explain how the value of such acts was that they provided novel stimulus that could be circulated amongst her followers on social media. As she explained, "[you're] posting for the impression that you're doing this. It's just about, like, feeding all your followers what I'm currently doing now". For her, the value of her act of care is that she could "feed" her followers, and thus demonstrate an alternative, digital, act of caring for them that is rooted in the "here", but which also, paradoxically, draws her attention away from it. Digital logics of care can, in this sense, be seen as an extension of the neoliberal ethic of care, which 'holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market' (Harvey 2005: 3). A social media profile becomes a representational marketplace through which images are circulated, feedback is solicited, and the self is (re)positioned within the network.

Whilst the experiences that Ming shared focussed primarily on herself, and how her physical labour translated into valuable documentation for her followers, representations of care become even more problematic when they involve documenting local communities. Indeed,

[1] All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

they are *most* problematic when documenting children, as the 'child image can be read as both a colonial metaphor for the majority world and as a signifier of humanitarian identity' (Manzo 2008: 632). Posting images of the children encountered during voluntourism project was a common practice amongst our interviewees, and the basis of various representational politics. As a metaphor for humanitarian concern, posting photographs of children enable the voluntourist to represent themselves in a particular, and positive, light. Indeed, the motivation for taking and posting photographs of children online can be seen as a demonstration of care for the network. In response, many projects established ground rules for the taking (or not) of photographs of local communities. Often, however, these rules were flouted, which itself reveals the allure of the network; of using people "here" to satisfy the voyeuristic impulses of people "there". Cheryl spoke of a teaching project she participated in in Surabaya, Indonesia, and how:

> don't think we're allowed to take photos of faces… But I think there were a few members who still go on taking photos.
> Why do they do that?
> They just cannot disconnect… [it's] to make themselves look cooler.
> Why?
> guess you can show people who you are actually serving, and who you are actually helping. The kids.

The irony here is that "serving… the kids" becomes a method through which they can also serve their networks, whilst simultaneously "mak[ing] themselves look cooler". Andrea, an undergraduate student who participated in Youth Expedition Projects to Cambodia and Vietnam, lamented these practices as "it sets a very different focus on the project itself. Like, it's as if our volunteers are there to play instead of really committing their services to the community". Her point is that these representational practices shift the focus of the project, and dilute its potential impact. They cause participants to be distracted, as they are simultaneously oriented towards both the here and there. In itself, this has an arbitraging effect that works to grant recognition and status, and thus elevate the individual within their social networks. Through digital immersion, they therefore become implicated within, and responsive to, the 'progressive penetration of market control on our personal, political and emotional selves' (Mostafanezhad 2013c: 322), which foregrounds a shift in focus from the physical *act* of care, to the more symbolic *representation* of care. This shift was exemplified in the comments of an NGO employee who organised volunteer tourism trips under the name "Holiday for Humanity". These trips are family-oriented, and would therefore involve parents and their children participating in overseas community service programmes. Zann, a marketing communications executive at the NGO, explained a recent trip to Nepal, during which the families engaged in a housebuilding project. As she explained:

> When the families are building the rice bag houses, the mums are actually holding a phone, videoing down the whole process instead of doing it… I remember there was a father that said, like, 'we spend so much time taking photos instead of actually doing the work'… So it, you know, suddenly becomes a blur between, like, charity work and a photography journey, because it just feels like the parents are more caught up with taking photographs and videos of their kids, and proudly showing it to the world via social media, instead of focussing on the present, which is doing the work that they were meant to do…
> Why do you think they do that?
> To show… Yeah, that's a good question. To show they're doing good.

Digital representations of acts of caregiving provide new material that can be used to bolster the social network, and thus position the self in a more caring light. This offers new insight into Manzo's (2008: 636) notion of the "paradox of absence" that is used to evoke the 'unseen in images as well as the seen'. Digital representations of care expand this logic, as pictures are taken from the perspective of what is seen "here", but are used to satisfy the network that represents an unseen "there". Toggling between these two modalities of presence serves to reproduce the digital void, whilst expanding the *value* of care through the arbitraging logics that underpin them. Yet, whilst digital connectivity enables value to be reproduced during the project period, by the same logic it can also lead to the *un*doing of care once it is over.

4.3. Digital (dis)connection and the (un)doing of care

The digital provides individuals with unique opportunities to both extend, and paradoxically to limit, the extent of their caregiving. Given that many volunteers "do" care through the relationships they develop with the beneficiaries they serve, the digital provides opportunities to continue these relationships beyond the project period. However, as much as digital connectivity provides the potential for these relationships to be continued, so too can it trigger the need for them to be *dis*continued if they no longer serve the purpose for which they were originally intended. In these instances, the caring relationship needs to be undone by actively disconnecting the caregiver from the beneficiary. Speaking of her experience teaching English to children in Surabaya, Indonesia, Ming explained how "during the process we had fun together, teach them stuff, learn new things from them… it builds more than just a transaction… They feel that we are truly theirs". Ming describes here a process of local children "claiming" the volunteers, of trying to get closer to them through education, and subsequently friendship. Digital technologies enable a relatively easy continuation of this friendship, with Ming going on to suggest that "they want to maintain a good connection and talk to us, even though we are gone". The doing of care associated with friendships becomes less place-based, and more connection-based. These connections bring into focus the idea that 'volunteer tourists – like tourists more generally – embody a whole range of socially constructed mobilities' (Sin et al. 2014: 126), which, in the context of digital connectivity, must be negotiated during, and sometimes long after, the volunteer experience. Whilst these relationships reflect an ethic of care for the individual, so too can their subsequent undoing be seen as a problematic outcome of digital connectivity.

Xuan, who also taught English in Surabaya alongside Ming, explained how these (un)doings played out. First, there was a general misunderstanding about what "connection" meant, and how it should be managed. Prior to leaving for Surabaya, the project organisers instructed the volunteers to *not* share their contact numbers with locals, as "I think they didn't want them [the locals] to contact us [the volunteers]… They just said contact numbers, so we didn't give our contact numbers". These efforts to block connectivity were, however, undermined by the sharing of Instagram usernames with beneficiaries. As Xuan put it, "at that point, when they're so nice, when they ask you, you will just say 'yes'". The sharing of Instagram usernames is depicted here as part of the relationship-building process – the *doing* of care – which in turn led to a second problem: the right of access. Given that Instagram is a mostly public content platform, there is no reason why one's username should not be shared with everyone. As Xuan explained, "if you're going to give it to one kid, make sure you don't deprive another kid of not giving them your Instagram". Connecting to beneficiaries through platforms like Instagram was a means to consolidate and strengthen the relationships they forged in the classroom; conversely, remaining disconnected is a form of "deprivation". Digital connection equates to the doing of care, which is predicated on an assumed right of access that is difficult to deny on both an emotional and logical level.

The access that comes with digital connectivity would, however, foreground a third problem that emerged when volunteers returned to Singapore. This problem was based on the beneficiaries using digital connectivity to try and continue the relationships that had initially been forged with voluntourists in Surabaya. But, as Xuan explained, digital connectivity has unintended consequences:

When we gave, it was, 'oh sure, let me give it to you'… [but] the problem was that after I came back to Singapore, they kept contacting me and calling me through the live video thing.
What would they say?
The kids would tell me, like, 'hello, I miss you'. For a few times I replied, but after that I stopped replying.
How long did they keep doing it?
It was quite long man, like 1–2 months?

The children go from being "so nice" when the volunteers are in Surabaya, to being "a bit annoying" once they returned to Singapore. The unthinking reflexivity of digital connectivity provides a way of demonstrating a degree of investment in the relationship that has been forged during the period of physical proximity, but becomes a fraught construct when maintained over distance. Thus, as much as digital connectivity provides the *potential* for care to be continued, physical distance can bring about its undoing. This undoing stems from the fact that social media causes opportunities for mutual care to emerge, the idea being that care becomes democratised. Beneficiaries are empowered to reach out to voluntourists once they return home, causing them to become active agents in reproducing the care exchange and thus levelling the power differential that voluntourism exploits. Yet, Xuan's reaction reveals disinterest in such reproductions. Instead, she *re*asserts the power differential by eventually refusing to engage in any form of communication, rendering the connection unidirectional and *non*-mutual again. Reflecting on this dynamic, Xuan shared how "I feel like, initially, I was 'OK, sure, let's talk', but after a while I don't think so. It's not that I'm unfriendly, but more that I don't see the point in communicating… I don't want to commit". The processes of connecting, communicating and thus committing to the relationship coalesce to form an act of care that is undermined by the fact that voluntourists see their experiences as discrete projects that are used to extract representational value. Their beneficiaries, however, see them as the beginnings of a longer period of engagement. The asymmetry of the relationship is emphasised by the ease with which it *can* be maintained if both parties want to. If not, the ethic of care from which voluntourism draws meaning is compromised.

The digital void is evoked throughout these practices. As parties 'enter spaces with no clear sense of place and time' and navigate relationships based on 'no clear individual subjectivity other than that of being 'local'' (Sin and Minca 2014: 99), the potential for misunderstanding is great. Caring relationships are formed on the basis of locality – of volunteers and their beneficiaries being physically proximate for the duration of the project – however, the digital void both enables the continuation of this relationship at a distance, and, paradoxically, also provides the reason for terminating it. Digital voids traverse distance and difference. They transcend spatio-temporal distinctions, but in doing so they problematise the ethic of responsibility that underpins the new currencies of care being practiced through voluntourism. In view of this situation, Ting admitted that "I don't know how to, like, reconcile all these different things", by which she means being connected and disconnected, being here and there, of caring and of *not really* caring. Whilst Goodman (2011: 82) argues that 'transnational cultural economies of care smooth over the inequalities of power… and the very structures which make them up', the digital void can be seen to create a new power geometry that is based on the politics of (dis)connection, and the need to (un)do the acts of care from which representational value was (once) extracted. Voluntourists struggle to navigate this power geometry in a sensitive way. These struggles reveal the 'extent to which digital technologies affect everyday humanitarians' abilities to assume responsibility at a distance as a form of 'disinterested care' have been linked to questions about the 'proper distance' they establish in relationships with others' (Schwittay 2019: 1931). As much as the digital void extends the possibilities for care, so too does it undermine it through the politics of (dis)connection.

5. Conclusions

This paper has explored how digital technologies mediate the experience of voluntourism. It has advanced the conceptual lens of the digital void – the space of (dis)connection that emerges when individuals navigate different forms of connectivity that span both the digital and real worlds. These navigations manifest as practices of extraction, which involve voluntourists maximising the representational value of being connected to both the "here" and "there". Whilst such practices may be a fact of the digitally mediated lives than many of us now lead, they become problematic when interpreted in conversation with the ethic of care that (is meant to) underpin volunteering. In such instances, the digital void reveals itself in various ways, and serves to complicate the emerging and evolving relationships between the providers and beneficiaries of care. These relationships refer not just to the acts of care that are directed at local communities, but also the geographically dispersed webs of social relations that volunteers are responsive to through digital connectivity. These dynamics foreground the 'challenge of extending care across distance' – whether physical or conceptual – and how these challenges can foreground the 'exclusion of those close at hand' (Lawson 2007: 6). Indeed, the struggles that voluntourists faced in navigating these challenges reveals the fundamental realisation that 'our sense of connection and empathetic engagement with unfamiliar others is a significant determinant of the quality of collective social life' (Conradson 2003: 451). The question of the "quality of collective social life" has only become more pronounced within the past year, when the COVID-19 pandemic caused ideas of care, distance, proximity and connection to be interrogated anew.

As COVID-19 dramatically reduced the opportunity to travel, digital channels became more integral to the act of caregiving. Lockdowns and travel restrictions meant that many of us found ourselves in positions of prolonged proximity with immediate family members. Simultaneously, we relied on digital connectivity even more to maintain our professional and social lives, and to remain in-touch with non-proximate relatives. How the digital void might have expanded to fill the void of *distance* that comes from forced immobility foregrounds a new era of how we might think about the interplay between emotional and geographical distance, and how the mediatory role of the digital therein might serve to redefine the boundaries – geographical, discursive, ethical – of what it means to care, and be cared for. Indeed, as we start to transition into a world coming to terms with the psycho-social, economic and cultural effects of COVID-19, there is a need for closer examination of how everyday acts of relationship-building and maintaining; practices of engagement and reciprocity; and feelings of loneliness, comfort and concern might be reshaped by the digital voids through which they are reproduced. Similarly, how the practice of digital arbitrage serves to reposition individuals in new matrices of social hierarchy and representational (in)justice also requires further exploration. In relation to voluntourism, the viewpoints of the "recipients" or "beneficiaries" of care require exploration as well, as does how digital voids might foreground a reimagination of the categories that are used to define who gives and receives "care". Our hope is that through these examinations and explorations we can forge new understandings of how digital (dis)connectivity can move beyond distraction, becoming a tool through which a new ethic of engagement is forged instead.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Orlando Woods: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Shee Siew Ying:** Investigation, Project administration.

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