

# Coping with the corona crisis

## EXAMPLES OF WEB CREATIVITY

Heike vom Orde

**The author gives an overview of how people are coping with the COVID-19 crisis on the web.**

### THE CORONA CRISIS AND THE WEB

Worldwide, the coronavirus pandemic is not just a medical and economic challenge, but also a psychosocial one: these are exceptional circumstances, which cause extraordinary stress for people of all age groups (see also vom Orde in this issue). In many respects, the internet and its users play a special role in these unusual times.

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis, worldwide internet traffic has seen huge growth. People all over the world tend to use digital technology as a bridge across physical distances. According to an OECD study (2020), online traffic through internet exchange points (IXP) increased by up to 60% in OECD countries from December 2019 to March 2020. This is down to the increasing numbers of people working and studying from home, streaming video games and films, or making video calls from home. The DE-CIX in Frankfurt, one of the largest IXPs in the world, has been regularly peaking at over 9.1 terabits per second

since March 2020, which equals a simultaneous transmission of up to 2 million high-definition videos (ibid., p. 3).

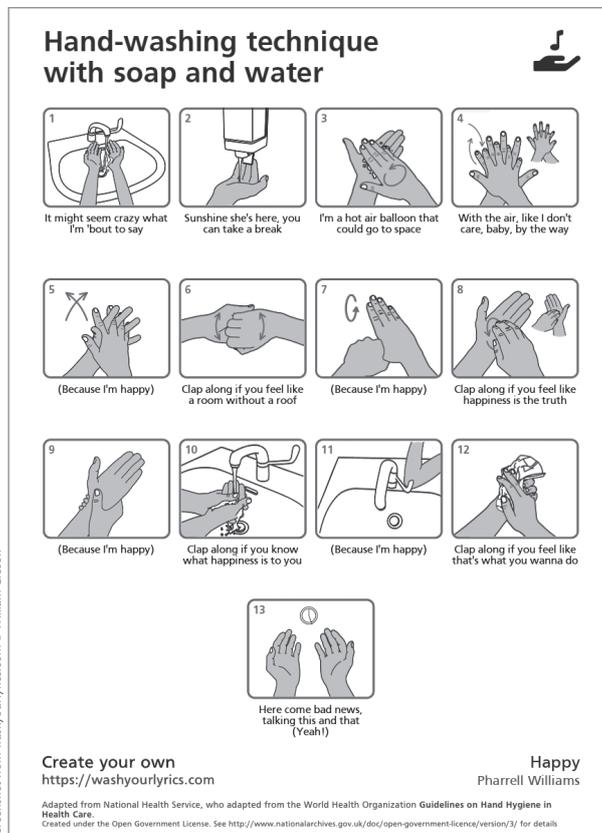
The COVID-19 crisis has also led to increased online media consumption in many countries around the world (Statista, 2020). People practising social distancing, self-isolation, and quarantining in order to stem the spread of the virus frequently turn to in-home entertainment. Even at the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, on the weekend of March

13 to 14, 2020, time spent streaming TV and videos online grew by more than 40% in Austria and Spain, and by 32% in Germany. In Italy, the school shutdown is currently driving a surge in internet traffic, as young media users tend to play online video games more frequently. In March 2020, Telecom Italia reported an increase of more than 70% in internet traffic over their landline network, with a big contribution from online gaming. Online games such as *Fortnite* and *Call of Duty* take up more bandwidth than

the business programs and conference call apps used by adults working from home (Lepido & Rolander, 2020).

### Burst of creativity

But it is not only in internet use that substantial growth can be observed. We are also seeing a huge burst of creativity in user-generated content on the web. There is nothing new about the potential for situations of stress and crisis to stimulate creativity. As the critic Jonathan Jones (2020) points out, “much of Europe’s greatest art” comes from times when plague and quarantine were an integral part of reality. But examples of creative output in times of crisis are not limited to high culture. Research



Ill. 1: Having fun when washing your hands by singing your favourite song

indicates that individuals who are actively engaging in a creative cultural process can reduce their level of anxiety or depression (Cuypers et al., 2011). In the context of stress prevention, creative arts interventions can significantly reduce stress and anxiety (Martin et al., 2018). Creativity in stressful times seems to help us to express ourselves and our feelings, but is also a successful way to deal with our frustrations and to explore what is troubling us. Here are some examples of how internet users are coping with the crisis online.



Ill. 2: [Helping children understand the pandemic with Lego](#)

they wash their hands for long enough and also do so effectively. More than 200,000 internet users have already made use of this offer.

To explain the restrictions during the pandemic to children, the Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau made a speech addressed to the young citizens of his country. A father who wanted to illustrate the politician's message for his sons made a video with animated Lego figures to accompany the speech (Ill. 2). The video went

## EXAMPLES OF COPING WITH THE COVID-19 CRISIS ON THE WEB

### Helping others during the crisis

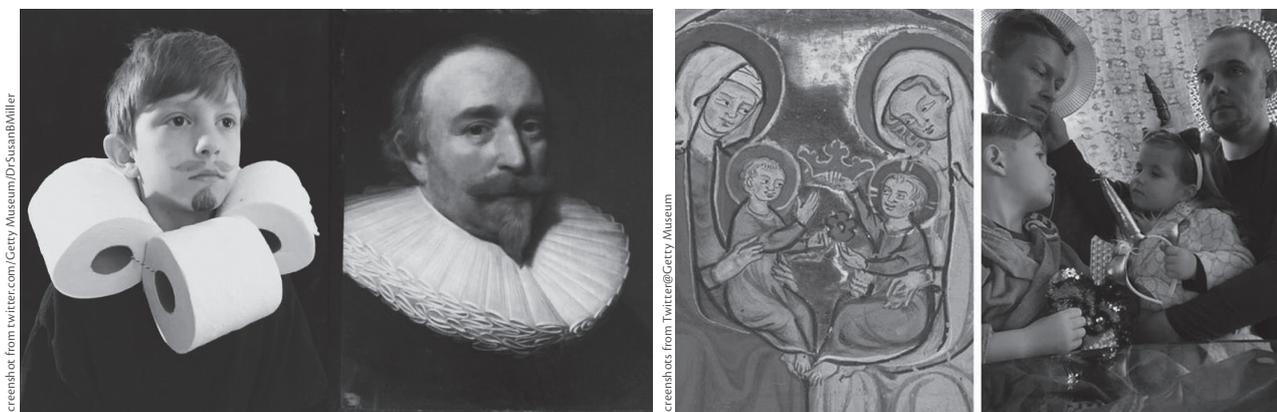
Very soon after it had become clear that the pandemic would have a major impact on our everyday life, users on social media began to offer help in coping with this exceptional situation. Some of these offers can be seen as an extended form of neighbourly help. For example, 15-year-old Noah Adler from Berlin quickly developed his website Coronaport,<sup>1</sup> launching it in the early

hours of 14 March 2020. This made it one of the first digital platforms offering help in Germany. The assistance offered there ranges quite pragmatically from shopping and childcare to distributing essential supplies in the neighbourhood.

William Gibson, a 17-year-old Briton, offers a form of assistance that is both useful and creative: his website [washyourlyrics.com](#) aims to make the tiresome but necessary chore of handwashing more entertaining (Ill. 1). Using their free choice of favourite song, users can produce a personalised poster with the corresponding lyrics online. This is meant to ensure that

viral on Twitter soon after.

Another very widespread form of social engagement on the web involves reaching out virtually to reduce the social distance for those groups who are particularly affected. The internet is full of examples from all over the world of children sending imaginative e-cards or videos to their grandparents to cheer them up during the lockdown. On Facebook, a Norwegian mother asked other users to send birthday greetings to her children, with whom she was in quarantine. The worldwide reaction was overwhelming, with creatively designed messages arriving from as far away as Alaska and South Africa.



Ill. 3 and 4: [Creativity in the family when recreating a piece of art with objects and people in the home](#)



Screenshot from YouTube © Jack Buchanan



Screenshot from YouTube © Ben Marsh

Ill. 5 and 6: Singing with the family to cope with quarantine

### Self-reflection and self-representation in quarantine

A traditional way of coping with crises in life is a diary. But instead of keeping this shut and shielded from the eyes of others in a drawer, many internet users are going online with their experiences of the crisis. In some cases people who have become ill wish to share important information by giving others insights into the course of the disease; others are motivated by a desire for self-reflection and sometimes self-representation in quarantine. Video diaries are also popular among journalists and artists as a means of documenting everyday life in the pandemic and highlighting coping strategies.

A wide range of experiences and challenges of everyday life, for example those of homeschooling, are shared on the web by parents and young people. For example, a Facebook post from a mother from the US went viral when she posted the following handwritten diary entry by her 8-year-old son on his first day of homeschooling: “It is not going good. My mom’s getting stressed out. My mom is really getting confused. We took a break so my mom can figure this stuff out. I’m telling you it is not going good.” She received many sympathetic responses from other parents, who also shared their experiences.

On the YouTube channel My #QuarantineLife, children and adolescents aged under 18 from all over the world had the opportunity to make a video reporting on their everyday life with the coronavirus, and at the same time to look beyond their own limited realm of experience (see also Carmona in this issue). A great deal of creative online content is also being generated within families during isolation. The video of a New Zealand family’s “Family Lockdown Boogie” (Ill. 5), which was viewed millions of times on YouTube, shows that even

### Creative expression as a coping tool

Artistic and aesthetic responses to the crisis from social media users are found in diverse forms on the web. On 25 March 2020, for example, the Getty Museum in Los Angeles issued a challenge on Twitter to recreate famous paintings with household objects. The feedback was phenomenal: by the end of April over 100,000 pictures had reached the museum. Many families and young people took part in the #GettyMuseumChallenge (Ill. 3 and 4).

A striking aspect of many creative approaches to the corona crisis in social media is that they often make use of well-known media content and images. For example, the 17-year-old

Briton John Palmer became famous on TikTok with his surreal videos on everyday life during the pandemic, referring to popular memes and internet jokes. In one video, for instance, he evokes his own isolation during social distancing by talking to imaginary friends from popular culture (such as Peppa Pig).

Music is also often used for creative purposes in the coronavirus era. Because news constitutes much-used (but sometimes emotionally stressful) media content, the BBC News theme has become a frequently evoked creative stimulus on the internet. This began on TikTok with an adaptation by a user, and continued with many musical variations by well-known and unknown social media users.

quarantine can be made more bearable with dancing and music. Another video that went viral was a song from the musical *Les Misérables*, adapted to the coronavirus era by a family of 6 from the UK (Ill. 6).

**Humour**

In many explorations of the reality of life in the COVID-19 crisis, the dominant element is humour. The internet is overflowing with funny memes, GIFs, posts and videos from all over the world (see also Pauliks in this issue). As a coping strategy, humour helps to regain control of the situation, to boost self-esteem and to make everyday life more bearable. There is evidence from the research that positive humour which playfully highlights the absurdities of life is more effective here than hostile sarcasm (Samson & Gross, 2012).

For example, 18-year-old Madeline Mai-Davies became a star on TikTok when she filmed an (alleged) neighbour – now known on the web as “the bushman” – creatively circumventing the lockdown (Ill. 7).



Ill. 7: Laughing at the absurdities of everyday life



Ill. 8: Comedy in times of corona: laugh your anxiety away

On the internet, humour also serves to make fun of authorities such as politicians. For example, the dubious suggestion by US president Donald Trump that people protect themselves from COVID-19 by injecting disinfectant has been parodied countless times on the web. But humour can also help to reduce social anxiety in relation to COVID-19. In Niger, a team of comedians, supported by UNICEF, re-enacted social situations to illustrate how important maintaining distance and handwashing are during the pandemic (Ill. 8). Within a few days the videos had been viewed over 100,000 times.

**NOTE**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.coronaport.net>

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