

# The Language of Togetherness: Woman, Intimacy, and the Early COVID-19 Western Narrative

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## Abstract

The news constructed language in the beginning of the COVID-19 narrative was characterized by the strategic construction of meaning and the use of specific narratives used to shape societal perceptions and influence responses to the virus. The discourse on COVID-19 employed specific narratives that were designed to strengthen the bonds between men and women through increased intimacy amidst the onset of the virus, which was fundamental to the UK's response. Sky News narratives were disseminated across many countries and played a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions and influencing responses to the pandemic on a wider scale to manage conflict through the construction of meaning, using discursive devices to shape the narrative and influence the masse. The simple life, family values and a back to nature approach were just some of the sub discourses that make up the master discourse of intimacy. Intimacy had become somewhat of a taboo post-millennium what with the onslaught of sadistic internet forms of male on female pornography—and the general mainstreaming of the sex industry—and was hidden from dominant ways of seeing prevalent in the Western post-millennial context. In this essay, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to understand the discourse of news construction as a social practice in which language plays a central role, emphasized by a post-structuralist paradigm. The arrival of Covid came with an unexpected change in the cultural dynamics between men and women, transgressing the language of lost rapport left by the sex industry and its gendered hierarchies between the sexes in late capitalism.

## Keywords

COVID-19 Narratives, Transgression, Sex Industry, News Construction, Intimacy, Woman, Language of Togetherness, Late Capitalism, Critical Discourse Analysis, Intimacy

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## 1. Introduction

On March 26<sup>th</sup> 2020, a seismic change took hold within the socio-economic environment; the pandemic COVID-19 unleashed its onslaught on a global scale. There are several theories of where this disease came from. The World Health Organization investigated but questions remain unanswered. To provide context, throughout the developed countries jabs to unprecedented levels were being rolled out later down the line. Cost was not an issue it seemed. Reuters documents that President Joe Biden even offered the third world countries a “pledge of \$4 billion to (the) COVAX vaccine program” (Reals, 2021) after the G7 meeting. *Sky News* showed the vulnerable thin armed children in Africa cueing to receive these *new* vaccines. New, because the gene changing structured vaccine was never tested wholesale before. In trying to shed light on the Covid, Regalado (2020) explains that the active ingredient is a “nucleoside-modified messenger RNA (modRNA) encoding the viral spike glycoprotein (S) of SARS-CoV-2” which to your average person means nothing other than you need a degree in organic chemistry to understand it, which to your average person means nothing other than you need a degree in organic chemistry to understand it. What was apparent was that people went out in their droves to receive it. The universal scale of the *disease and solution process* created a new ideological landscape across the UK where the class system is very much alive—also permeating other countries with economic hierarchies. Irrespective of the origins of this disease, the exact nature of it, and whether it was a creation for a “cover-up” for a socio-economic global fatality of late capitalism and/or a natural abreaction to the abuse of the planet from such a system... *or something else*... what is shown is an alteration of the signifier or conceptual aspect of the *word* “woman”. This became apparent in how her discursive construction altered within Western consensus—through a transformation through new meanings that arrived in language. Through this short window of time at the very beginning of COVID-19, we were invited to see woman momentarily free from the capitalist chains of patriarchy and as a result, “man” altered too.

The present techno-driven, neo-liberal climate is just another stage in the long history of Western Imperialism and is evident in that “mere definitions cannot ever completely discipline or corral the anarchic dissemination of meaning” (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 2011). This comment is further clarified by looking at words within a particular cultural context and the changes to these words as new mediated speech arrived rapidly across the net sphere, like the changes in the subjectivity of “woman” through the sex industry of big tech, post millennium. “Woman has literally been replaced by girl as the centri-focus of the dominant strand of the abusive male-centric sex industries” (Housden-Brooks, 2023) therefore has paved the way for more pro-paedophilic meaning to attempt entry into the mainstream—which are still very much considered abject in its concentrated definition throughout the West. However, the attempts to erase real woman has altered “man” who has also changed in Western language. Man,

as a privileged term, *was* an ambivalent subjectivity before big tech and is progressively becoming an object unto himself through the sex buyer ideology. After all, an object is defined by language as something with attributes—and the sex buyer is now an entity that has literal and recognisable requirements: the servile sex-worker, the entitlement, the ageism of women and control of their bodies through labour. The women of this industry are even encouraged to value their “work”, even to feel empowered by it in media outlets like *Huffington Post* who is a supporter of decriminalisation of sex-punters. This is shown in: *How Decriminalising Sex Work Would Help Some of The Most Stigmatised Workers in The Country* (HuffPost UK, 2017) whilst ignoring the plight of women in this industry in terms of their brute reality and the need of survival as being the desperate reason for entering the industry, especially amidst the living crisis in the UK since the pandemic—where people can’t afford to live sufficiently highlighted in *The Irish Independent* as “urgent” (2022). Decriminalising the users of girls and women’s bodies as labour would further normalise and politicise this insidious form of abuse already dangerously normalised creating inroads for legal abuse. Discourse is “inseparable from language” (Silverman, 1983) and should be addressed and concertedly altered to reveal such hidden ways of seeing experienced by those at the lowest finance brackets and have the potential to re-create major ideological facets in ways of seeing. This acknowledgement is vital before laws like this are proposed which would only further seek to erase women in language on an ideological level, by replacing authentic representations with heteronormative objects.

Tomlinson (2002) states: “(Globalization) is co-extensive with...the process of domination in which the west draws all cultures in its ambit”. “Media Imperialism”, as this process is also known, has recently pro-acted its full force during Covid coverage, in familiar ways to what’s happened to “woman” through sex industry discourse, demonstrating the technological superiority which came to its fore in the current post millennial moment which is now informing the next stage of AI if not dealt with now. The power of the media—used throughout history—in “controlling” consensus is shown in the uptake of “social distancing”, a re-flexing of the white-hot power of the intermix of a free-market media and government, which on this occasion overtly and abruptly crosses written and spoken discourses—into the existential body in its literal separation from other bodies. There exists a well-known concept called *divide and conquer*. The two-meter distancing rule was considered relatively inefficacious by a large number of people, although scientists celebrate stricter lockdown and mask-wearing measures as countries like China and South Korea were the “most influential in containing the spread of infections”. Greenfield points to cultural coercive conduct as utilised during this time, through “measures aimed at an assumed droplet pathogen (handwashing, surface cleansing, physical distancing) (as) over-emphasised” (2022). In the early days of Covid, Boris Johnson, having caught the virus, when addressing the UK’s population “moved powerfully be-

tween the personal and the political” (Jarvis, 2022). These mindful and reflective themes created a feeling of solace amid the widespread alarm through disseminated fear. One broadcast aired in the UK and beyond from *Sky News* from the Mayor of New York, spoke of “meat fridge vans” waiting outside its primary Hospital. In news outlet, Propublica, through the article *Life on a Block with an Emergency Morgue Truck* tells, Walsh points to the local experience of an unnamed resident who states, “We hear the hum of the refrigerator going all night long” (Waldman, n.d.). All the while, a paradoxically tightened form of digitization through remote working and e-commerce were pitted as “bringing us closer together” by virtue of verbal repetition told through Sky News and BBC broadcasters. The closeness would be achieved through a greater online presence. These “new” social sites might be provided by *Zoom* for digital classrooms and business meetings, along with E-commerce style “pop ups”, invariably promoted between round the clock coverage of the “Covid Crisis” which kept people on high alert as the rising death statistic came in daily. Furthermore, the devastating effects of the virus were emphasised through “alarming” images of bodies being thrust into “mass graves” by JCB 360 diggers in Indonesia told via the BBC shown in the article by Baraputri called *Dying Alone in Indonesia’s Grim Battle with COVID-19* (Baraputri, 2021). The graves were built to accommodate the “unprecedented”, and “exponential” numbers of the dead; whilst a *Sky* newsreader described COVID-19 as a “slow, painful death” (28/3/2020). From early March of 2020, *Sky News* had devoted its televisual focus to Covid’s “rampage” of the planet—seen in “unmatched viewing figures”. We can garner that the news is not attempting to calm people...on the contrary.

Via *Sky News*, Western Imperialist dominant “ways of seeing” are semiotically emblemized—or made meaning of *differentially* through coloured frames of red, white and blue making up the ongoing coverage of the coronavirus visual masthead which encapsulates the studio around the newsreader. The connotations of these colours connote Western Imperialism. The ongoing commentary has been intercut with audio-visual pieces that show “The Ice Bucket Challenge” in Russia, a “fun-filled” event showing primarily women and children in swimsuits being splashed with ice cold water, the “wife carrying race” held at a Surrey school in England (*MailOnline* February/2020), beer yoga in Canada (*YogiApproved.com* 20/20) beaconing “beer-heads” into naturopathic ways of living. This “cluster” of new meaning is indicative of an attempt to close divides between men and women whilst Big Brother aka the state takes over, as beer is a symbol of “mainstream masculinity”, yoga, presented at least, a “woman’s” practice, bridging a gap to form a new togetherness. To add to this stream of information is footage of Covid masks found in “ocean waste”, showing its detrimental effect on the globe, namely the planet damage and attendant ecological concerns. Of great importance to human signification in anchoring this meaning, is the striking footage via *Sky News* (March, 2020) displaying the image of the “the chattering classes” viewing 16<sup>th</sup> Century Tiatus “high-art”—enclaved within the

walls of an opulent high ceilinged art gallery—the walls adorned in a bluer hue of pink, with its preconditioned connotations of blue blood and royalty. This is significant because semiotically speaking this a metaphor for an impending entirely new systemic societal structure that calls on the princely traditions of high art, super wealth and a greater divide between rich and poor akin to the old Feudal systems.

Considering these almost incessant mediated repetitions through the first month of the COVID-19 coverage—*The Language of Togetherness*, took shape. This brand-new mediated language was triggered by a set of sub-discourses supporting greater intimacy which in the late capitalist pornification of culture is transgressive. The striking new *Language of Togetherness* was harnessed through discourses of mindfulness, family values, reflection, the simple life, and the Save The NHS slogan. “Love the one you’re with” banners were seen graffitied on motorway signs. Local British newspaper, *The Evening Echo*, printed a set of features thematized on greater appreciation of the moment called *Memories* (May, 2020) and mainstream magazines focused on fostering reflection through the simple life discourse with advice on “spa days” at home and healthy vegan meal ideas whilst in lockdown (Closer, May: 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020). On top of this were messages from people “self-isolating”, commemorating the courage of health workers and the “courageousness” of the NHS (*Cleveland Clinic, Instagram*: April, 2020). Along with Save The NHS, pivotal in centring the revelation of the “cogs” that keep the system afloat, came the revelation of a usually hidden intersection of working-class women, namely cleaners, carers and nurses, all traditionally defined by low-pay yet essential occupations, and all conventionally discluded from mainstream patriarchal discourse. This renewed awareness that was underpinned by a Marxist vision, inadvertently, revealed those that literally keep the rich alive through their labour, the women of all ages, of all ethnicities, yet all low paid.

In the UK, the former Chancellor, now Prime, Rikki Sunnak, introduced The Furlough Scheme which recompensated to the self-employed with 80% of their wages awarded back through government grants every three months of lockdown with the caveat of potential future “higher taxes” to replenish the financial deficit. Whilst in America, Kuzoch stated, “the government passed the \$2 trillion Cares Act relief package to help those facing financial hardships during the coronavirus pandemic...sending out stimulus check payments to millions of eligible, low-earning Americans” (23, June 2020). A fervent compliance was felt as people were grateful that Big Brother swooped down like an albatross to save them. The words “lockdown” and “two-meter distancing” had fully joined the lexicon, and our felt agency of times bygone was displaced by a child to parent relationship with the state which knocked the sovereign individual man—and his felt entitlement over women and girls via the sex-buyer ideology—off of his pedestal.

There has been one wildcard in the renewed hegemony taking place, in the

shape of President Trump, whose coverage of the global event has been unstable and provocative to say the least. To give some perspective on this, by the 8<sup>th</sup> June, later on in the Covid trajectory, when global figures of death were massively in decline, racist police brutality went viral in the form of murder of man of colour, George Floyd, on June 2, 2020. George Floyd, 46, died after being handcuffed on the street and put into a “chokehold” in the custody of the Minneapolis police on Memorial Day. It is very likely that Trump’s renowned ill management of Covid, along with his default anti-establishment ideology vis a vis a dinosaur right wing republicanism, provoked this next set of events. During the Covid, Trump’s “get back to work” slogan came too early, amidst the general feeling of real fright and uncertainty of a never witnessed before pandemic. This contrasted greatly with his initial outspoken concern of the Covid Crisis and its devastating potential (26/3/2020). Initially, Trump showed no respect to The WHO’s stark health warnings and curbed his focus on the economy based on his commentary alluding to the “wants of the people” in getting back to work. This erratic change of course confused the people who wanted governance and guidance at this time as expected by the democrats—and faith plummeted in Trump preceding the next remarkable chain of events in the form of anti-institutionalised-racist revolts across the globe. *The Language of Togetherness* gained even more significance as formerly distinct minded races, informed by their original divisive hierarchical intersection through unspoken unease with each other, suddenly align against the potential entry of an “alt-right fascist” government used against Trump’s and his over-zealous directives by the left.

## 2. Methodology

The article primarily focuses on the array of discourses prevalent in the media sphere within a Western context at the beginning of the major Sky news announcement of the gravity posed by the disease, COVID-19. “Despite the well-established role of journalism as a government watchdog, news media do not neutrally mirror every social event. Instead, news reporting, highly mediated by language, is filled with political interests, values, and attitudes” states Kong (2022). CDA is used here to uncover the power dynamics and hidden agendas behind news—primarily Sky News around the early Covid timeframe and beyond to contextualize the beginning. The relations of power and ideology are available from examining certain formulations of discourse. The newly emerged constructions reveal how certain voices and perspectives are privileged or marginalized in the news. The hidden aspects are revealed as the proverbial veil was lifted from our consensus as we entered a dystopia that magnified the importance of loved ones transgressing the silent taboo of intimacy to bring strengthened bonds back between men and women, girls and boys lost through the rigid constructions of the normalisation of a sex industry where women’s bodies are bought and sold commercially. Against this phenomenon a cast of the signs of Imperialism and Super Wealth were on show creating an ideology of hierarchy

through a reassertion of Royal Values. Peng (2017) states, “Discourse as (a) semiotic realization of social reality could thus be studied and analysed to show its relation to ideology, which is described as the obstacle to solving the social wrong.” Ideology is revealed by examining discourse in language which are inseparable by virtue of meaning making. This concept forms the foundation of CDA and is essential for understanding how language is used to shape social realities and maintain power structures in news construction and other forms of discourse. The news discourse became obvious as these new discursive sites in the form of news articles such as the “cultured viewing Tiatius high art” were repeated sometimes five times a day and certainly daily during the early period across March over April 2020. In examining the new linguistic clusters, social meanings can be attributed through the choice of words and phrases, and visual symbols which when read semiotically (differentially and arbitrarily) mean something such as the red, white and blues of imperialism which point to reassertions of power relations and underlying ideologies of dominance exercised through language.

### 3. Conclusion

As a linguistic phenomenon, the addition of COVID-19 as a sign imbued by connotations—has seen overall lexicon changes in what Derrida infamously calls “sign slippage” occur in unprecedented measures; this is where all words gain new meaning through socio-environmental changes. As an ideological vehicle, the pandemic, has given rise to government studies that produce more “faith in the government” at least in the UK, across all age groups, albeit the young, who have been framed as “not taking it seriously enough” with only 60 percent in support of the government in contrast to that of the elderly who pledged 82 percent devotion (*Sky News* 29/3/2020). To this, the newsreader cited the government’s view of this as “insensitive”—towards those not taking Covid seriously. Belying the discourse, is the implementation of the government’s draconian new laws allowing “people to be sectioned on one doctor’s say so” and brand new “dispersal and social distancing” powers, of no more than two per group, only more allowed in the case of “vulnerable persons” and “groups from individual households.” This firmly asserts Big Brother aka The Government as Derrida’s “transcendental signifier” which is central to all language, replacing the former “capitalist atheistic”, “sovereign” man as that which informs the world of objects. The pandemic has resulted in the real time re-connection between couples and families—positively documented in woman’s mainstream rag *Closer Magazine* (April 2020) in which women talk of closer bonds with men and family. Even, the desecrated UK “sex-symbol”, potent in her heteronormative discursive porn chic identification, Katie Price, has been *re-branded* as “only human” through appearances in multiple women’s magazines. In one such article, Price confessed as “being close to suicide” through her “own” voice, in contrast to the usual third person commentary (22 May 2020), the article anchored at the bot-

tom of the page, by the phrase “we’re all in this together”, embellished with the rainbow synonymous with the support for the NHS and peace and love. The same magazine, before the advent of *The Language of Togetherness*, constructed Price aka Jordan as “desperate” for being “over forty”, whilst surreptitiously portraying a vindictive outlook about Price’s “fear for her ruining her looks through surgery”. The article was anchored by unflattering images of her “in pain”, no doubt for the purposes of the sadist voyeurism used against women by women born of internalised misogyny from Western language’s lexical scope. In contrast during Covid, Katie was sympathized with, even *cared for* by the same magazine. Compounding these renewed signifiers, were the focus on the cleaners and health workers and carers at the forefront of Covid, the literal lifesavers working tirelessly in support of sustaining life. Consequentially, those propping up the system, the *real* images of women embodying all shapes and sizes and ages and colours, those that maintain the forces of production through the lowest wages, and through the labour of love, who suddenly became the very heart of the nation.

The alteration of the transcendental signifier or centre sign from sovereign man to Big Brother aka The State had the effect of informing all language. The central ideological movement of the atheistic capitalist *average* man—hidden in plain sight—which creates the lens in which all objects are defined by Government aka Big Brother are essentially existing independently from the wider system that informs them yet reinforces all language. The naturalisation of this process of change is occurring due to what Derrida also terms the “system of deferral” which is whereby meaning is perpetually deferred because every renewed use changes its structure, and therefore all meanings it constitutes. The sudden revelation of the liminal, or abject or “death” is here Covid—and its attendant meaningless inter-merge chains of meaning via images of coffin’s—with the very real double-blow of the prospect of not being able to “say goodbye to loved ones” in the event of contamination of the *severe strain* of Covid infection. This was constructed through an imposed guilt via a well-publicised “extra burdening” on the NHS, creating guilt for wanting to say goodbye to family, that is our birthright. The process of this is nothing short of spectacular and one of history making. Whilst what *Sky News* names “results”, throughout this historical time-period, the daily global death toll in the UK rises, against the backdrop of a “global crisis” that has seen 10,000 deaths in Italy, with Spain not far behind with warnings of third world “concerns” due to already “unsanitized” conditions, with footage of comparative mass-disarray in Africa and India as countries go into “lockdown”. To this, unknown channels of meaning open—displacing all discourse by new layers of denotation as, “a mode of communication that exceeds language...shattering the composed rationality of the isolated individual” (Botting & Wilson, 1997).

So, the sex industry as a signifier that caters the signified *desire* that is “power” within the “previous” incantation of capitalism, is further revealed as a diapha-



nous delusional construction born of futility—and not the all-advancing *rainbow road* to “what men want”. The entry of death through the non-discriminate Covid narrative upsets the trance of patriarchal neo-liberal signification to the point that all human creatures are conflated into oneself, un-relatively, re-identified, beyond the rigidity of alterity through the collapse of hierarchy. This is syncretized by the socialist political insertion to stemming the “disease” by a revelatory re-appropriation of labour into key-work functions that literally keep and have kept up to now the “illusory phallogocentric sign system” operational, freeing women hidden by their “low value” ascribed by capitalism, shoring up its malevolent nature and inward transgression visible through a different outlook over the whole world of objects via the Covid death narrative.

All business which run on sign value, not use value, and therefore deemed non-essential, have re-engaged us online or liquidised with “liquidation guidance” provided from companies like gaining provenance. Irrespective of whether we return to a phallogocentric capitalist structure digitally re-enhanced to the point that attending funerals are internet based (*OnlineFunerals.com*), transformation has occurred through the *Language of Togetherness* through crossing *the Taboo of Intimacy*. The contention between the rabid and ever-mutating abuse porn construct and its relative exposure through *The Language of Togetherness*—at first by revealing women to discourse—and not least by virtue of social distancing—has enabled the secret channels of Intimacy to reveal themselves, altering the binarized subjective balance between man and women and the intersections that upset them through alterations of race, and class and age. The relationship between men and women through language has consequently altered irrevocably.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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