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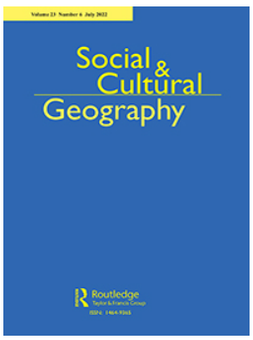
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COVID19 geographies: activities and activisms of those opposed to or concerned about changes to sexual and gendered legislation and cultures

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ABSTRACT

COVID19 is inherently geographical in its impact on society. Not only has it deepened pre-existing inequalities and further isolated groups that rely on physical spaces, such as LGBTQ people, the pandemic required a restructuring of multiple forms of time–space relations including activism. Using interview and questionnaires responses from early 2021, we explore the impact of COVID19 on the activities of those expressing concerns about, and opposition to, socio-legal changes related to sexualities and genders in Canada, Great Britian and Ireland. Participants' perceptions of the effects of COVID19 regimes (lockdowns and restrictions) highlight four key trends. First, the biggest group of questionnaire respondents understood their views/activities as unchanging. Second, some participants noted a disengagement with sexual and gender politics. Third, those who were activists before/during COVID19 noted challenges in continuing their activities online with the loss of face-to-face interactions, and how they negotiated new spatialities. Finally, for some participants COVID19 regimes meant either newly engaging in, or increasing their pre-pandemic, activism with time to 'research' and to develop their activities. Further work is needed to investigate if our findings are similar to other groups engaged in other forms of activism and the longitudinal effects and implications of COVID19 geographies on activism.

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Geografías del COVID-19: Actividades y Activismos de aquéllos que se oponen o están preocupados por cambios en la Legislación y las Culturas Sexuales y de Género

RESUMEN

El COVID-19 es inherentemente geográfico en su impacto en innumerables segmentos de la sociedad. No sólo ha profundizado las desigualdades preexistentes e incrementado el aislamiento de grupos que dependen de espacios físicos, como las personas LGBTQ, la

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pandemia ha requerido una reestructuración de múltiples formas de relaciones espaciotemporales, incluido el activismo. Utilizando respuestas de entrevistas y cuestionarios de principios de 2021, exploramos el impacto del COVID-19 en las actividades de aquéllos que expresan preocupación y oposición a los cambios en la legislación y las culturas sexuales y de género en Canadá, el Reino Unido e Irlanda. Las percepciones de los participantes sobre los efectos de los regímenes del COVID19 (cierres y restricciones) destacan cuatro tendencias clave. Primero, el grupo más grande de encuestados entendió sus puntos de vista/actividades como sin cambios. En segundo lugar, algunos participantes notaron una desvinculación y un desapego de la política sexual y de género. Tercero, aquellos que fueron activistas antes/durante los regímenes del COVID-19 notaron desafíos para continuar sus actividades en línea y la pérdida de interacciones cara a cara, y cómo negociaron estas nuevas espacialidades. Finalmente, para algunos participantes, los regímenes del COVID-19 significaron participar nuevamente o aumentar su activismo previo a la pandemia. Tuvieron tiempo para 'investigar' y desarrollar sus actividades. Nuestros hallazgos pueden ser similares a otros grupos involucrados en compromisos políticos. Se necesita más trabajo para explorar la prevalencia de las tendencias identificadas, los efectos longitudinales y las implicaciones de las geografías del COVID-19.

Géographies de la pandémie de COVID19: les activités et les activismes des personnes qui contestent ou craignent les changements juridiques et culturels concernant les sexes et les genres

RÉSUMÉ

COVID19 est fondamentalement géographique dans sa répercussion sur de nombreuses composantes de la société. La pandémie a non seulement aggravé des inégalités qui existaient déjà et isolé encore plus des groupes qui dépendent des espaces physiques, tels que les LGBTQ, mais elle a aussi nécessité une restructuration de nombreux modes de rapports temps-espace, y compris l'activisme. À l'aide des réponses à des entretiens et des questionnaires qui ont pris place au début de 2021, nous explorons la répercussion de la pandémie de COVID19 sur les activités des personnes qui expriment leurs craintes envers les changements juridiques et culturels concernant les sexes et les genres, ainsi que de celles qui leur sont opposées, au Canada, au Royaume-Uni et en Irlande. Les perceptions des participants à l'égard des effets des régimes de la pandémie (confinements, restrictions) mettent en valeur quatre grandes tendances. Premièrement, le plus large groupe des répondants considérait que leurs vues et leurs activités n'avaient pas changé. Deuxièmement, des participants ont remarqué un désengagement et un détachement vis-à-vis de la question politique des sexes et des genres. Troisièmement, les personnes qui étaient activistes avant et pendant les régimes de la pandémie de COVID19 ont détecté des difficultés avec la poursuite de leurs activités en ligne et la perte des interactions face à face, et la manière dont elles ont négocié ces

nouvelles spatialités. Enfin, pour des participants, les régimes pendant la pandémie ont signifié soit un nouvel engagement dans l'activisme, soit une amplification de l'engagement qui existait déjà avant la pandémie. Ils ont eu le temps de « faire de la recherche » et de faire évoluer leurs activités. Nos observations sont peut-être semblables à celles d'autres groupes qui étudient l'engagement politique. Il faudrait plus de recherche pour examiner la prépondérance des tendances identifiées et les implications et les effets longitudinaux des géographies de la pandémie de COVID19.

Introduction

The impact of COVID19 and related political and social consequences has both recreated and exacerbated existing inequalities across various geographies, including for LGBTQ people (Davenport et al., 2020; Brickell, 2020, July 8; Grant et al., 2021). The emergence of these unstable 'COVID19 Geographies' requires researchers to rework understandings of the geographies of everyday life and to consider how these geographies are differentially and inequitably experienced for myriad groups (Castree et al., 2020; Rose-Redwood et al., 2020), including for those who contest the consequences of sexual and gendered rights and equalities on political, social and cultural life, including abortion, and same-sex marriage (Nash & Browne, 2020). In this paper, we explore the activities of those who are opposed to or concerned about changes to gender and sexual legislations and cultures in Canada, Ireland and the GB during the pandemic in 2020 and early 2021. We offer insights into how their activities and related activisms are reconstituted within particular COVID19 regimes (including lockdowns, limits on public gatherings and social distancing). These generate temporally bounded COVID19 Geographies, that is, spatialities that reflect unstable and distinctive ways of conducting everyday lives within COVID19 regimes.

We draw on data from online questionnaires and interviews from the ERC research project 'Beyond Opposition'[1] to argue that particular COVID19 Geographies are being constituted through both online and face-to-face engagements within shifting spatial and temporal constraints and possibilities. In our previous research (Browne & Nash, 2014; Nash & Browne, 2015, 2020), we focused exclusively on individuals and organisations mounting a concerted political and social campaign in opposition to gender and sexual equalities, that is, individuals and groups we called heteroactivist. In this research, our participants are those who are not necessarily activists (in a more formal sense) but who are concerned about the changes wrought by transformative sexual and gendered legislative and cultural initiatives in the 21st century. Our goal is to understand and engage with these individuals who may experience everyday spaces as more difficult or complex because of sexual and gendered changes. Second, and in the context of this paper, our focus, then, is not primarily on activist arguments and tactics, but is instead on their activities around sexual and gendered issues within COVID19 regimes and to detail the resulting geographies. These activities and perceptions offer key insights into how COVID19 has affected the use of public/private spaces to pursue political and social goals in particular where such activities are increasingly outside of mainstream cultural norms in the countries under discussion.

We begin with a brief overview of the relevant research on the impact of COVID19 on sexual and gendered landscapes and show some of the ways in which activist geographies that oppose sexual and gender equalities have been conceptualised. We then outline our methods before considering our understandings of emergent COVID19 Geographies through our examination of the questionnaire and interview data that asked about the impact of COVID19 on participant's activities related to sexual and gender legislative and social changes. In exploring activities and the everyday spaces of COVID19 geographies, we do not focus on the details of various political positions. Instead, we examine our participant's activities during COVID19 through a discussion of four diverse, and at times contradictory ways participants managed their engagement with sexual and gendered issues. First, a significant group of respondents argued that their views had not changed as a result of COVID19 regimes and neither had their activities. Some also noted that while their views and participant had not changed, they noted that others had. Second, and in contrast, a number of respondents noted a disengagement with sexual and gender politics arising out of emergent COVID19 regimes. Yet, thirdly, others found ways to maintain their engagement and/or activism albeit in newly constituted Covid19 Geographies due to the loss of face-to-face contact and the move online. Fourth, COVID19 regimes opened up the possibility of either newly engaging in activism (that they had not engaged in before) or indeed increasing their knowledge of what constituted key issues and developing their activism in this area. This highlights the differential ways those opposed to, or concerned about changing sexual and gender landscapes are experiencing newly emergent COVID19 Geographies and the effects, or lack thereof, on their activities. In doing so, the paper points to the complex ways that the spatialities of COVID19 regimes that have impacted the activities of those opposed to/concerned about sexual and gender transformations, including abandoning some activities and creating new forms of engagement.

COVID19 and sexual and gendered landscapes

COVID19 is inherently geographical, and geography is key to understanding the nature and types of responses that mitigate against and attempt to contain the disease (Shepherd, 2020; Wolman, 2020; Aalbers et al., 2020). Distinctive geographies produce a range of varied responses seeking to grapple with and theorise the various elements of the spread, transmission, and the related losses, inequalities, and effects of the virus (see, for example, Castree et al., 2020; Rose-Redwood et al., 2020). A substantial literature has developed exploring myriad aspects of COVID19's impact on global political, social and economic health,[2] but despite this, there is little research on the intersection of COVID, activism and gender and sexualities.

The realities of COVID19 are clearly grounded in particular national/regional/local geographies that vary in terms of state resources, responses and reactions. In particular, government or state regimes related to the pandemic (e.g., quarantine, lockdowns and vaccine roll-outs) have uneven impacts and can often exacerbate existing geographies of difference for societies' most vulnerable and is experienced along various axes including sexualities and genders. For example, the home is an important site for the experience of COVID19 and research has examined the increase in domestic violence (Davenport et al., 2020; Brickell, 2020, July 8) and the effects of working from home on individuals and

businesses as well as the allocation and/or experiences of shifting caring responsibilities (Iacovone et al., 2020; Manzo & Minello, 2020). This work highlights the often-inequitable interrelationship between gender and caring that is also geographically differentiated in terms of Anglo-American hegemonies (e.g., Standring & Davies, 2020). Whilst this research has supported calls for fundamental shifts around unequal gendered relations in the home made visible through COVID, initial hope that changes might come about in deeply entrenched power relations, has given way to explorations about how 'pre-existing conditions', are reshaped and recreated (Standring & Davies, 2020). These include the reiteration of particular forms of masculinities as a response to the ontological insecurities of pandemics and responses that reiterate nationhood, and national protections (Agius et al., 2020).

For vulnerable people and communities, including LGBTIQ+ people, the pandemic has created losses that are familiar to those working in the geographies of sexualities and in queer geographies (Brown & Browne, 2016). Restrictions and lockdowns have shuttered the material social spaces critical to communities, activisms, well-being and empowerment (Grant et al., 2021; Salerno et al., 2020). This loss of social spaces for LGBTIQ+ people has implications for queer neighbourhoods and will have a broader impact on mental and physical health as support systems in terms of LGBTIQ+ -friendly medical and health facilities, counsellors, hospice and administrative centres are shuttered or services reduced (Banerjee & Nair, 2020; DeMulder et al., 2020; Fish et al., 2020; Gato et al., 2020; Gonzales et al., 2020; Grant et al., 2021; Jen et al., 2020; Kneale & Becares, 2020; Mattei et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2021; O'Neill, 2020).

It is clear that LGBTIQ+ people and those opposed to sexual and gendered changes are increasingly turning to online activities to meet the social needs arising from COVID19 (Baumel et al., 2021; Holloway et al., 2021). In combination, diverse COVID19 regimes and emergent online social and political spaces created diverse forms of engagement that at times worked in tandem with and in solidarity across diverse and distant places (Kowalewski, 2021). Moreover, COVID19 and responses to it, reconstituted various emotional geographies including, for example, the experience of anger at the virus (Grant & Smith, 2021) and hope for post-capitalist post-pandemic landscapes (Mendes, 2020). Yet, at the time of writing, there is very little focusing directly on engagement with sexualities/gendered issues or how the COVID19 Geographies of everyday lives related to these issues have been experienced.

With COVID19 regimes, engagement in sexual and gendered issues has largely moved online spaces. In Canada, for example, groups mobilized during COVID19 against so-called gender ideologies (e.g., Deeming, 2020) or objected to legislation banning conversion or reparative therapy (e.g., '"Online campaign'," 2020). These are more formal activist groups that already provided or operated online spaces where like-minded individuals could meet to discuss their concerns around sexual and gendered social and political changes in public, semi-private or private online gathering places. Activists have also organized online conferences and events to continue outreach to both their supporters and to those who might be interested (e.g., Fain, 2020).

Whilst research to date has focused on these more formal manifestations of hetero-activism and contestations around social and political changes (Burack, 2014; Nash & Browne, 2020; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018), very little is known about how those who hold these views experience everyday spaces and how they construct their activities and

associated engagements. It is also important to understand how the advent of COVID19 has impacted those concerned about these changes, as well as those actively contesting them, within and beyond more formal heteroactivism. Bringing together sexualities, COVID19 and activisms through a spatial lens enables explorations of the reactions to, and experiences of, newly constituted online spaces and the loss of face-to-face spaces. Augmenting the literature in this way indicates important insights into activist COVID19 geographies, within and beyond sexualities and genders.

Beyond opposition: Methods[3]

This paper draws on data from the Beyond Opposition project (https://beyondopposition.org), an ERC project that explores the experiences of those who are concerned about, or opposed to changes in sexual and gender legislation, politics and cultures in Canada, Great Britian and Ireland. This includes activists, but also extends beyond them to 'ordinary' people who hold these views and concerns but are not necessarily politically active in any formal way. As noted earlier, the research is located in Canada, Great Britian and Ireland, locations which have experienced extensive legislative, political and social changes related to sexualities and gender since the turn of the century (Browne & Nash, 2020; Weeks, 2007).

Initially, data collection was based on online questionnaires, in-person interviews and attendance at public events such as conferences, rallies and protests. Our initial recruitment strategy focused on connecting with key groups and organisations that we identified through the public activism around key issues in Great Britian, Ireland and Canada. Shortly after data collection began in February, 2020, the project found itself caught up in the fallout from COVID19 and associated regimes that prevented face-to-face data collection. We shifted our focus from face-to-face interviews to foregrounding the online questionnaire as interview recruitment stalled. This shifted again in the Autumn 2020, as more mediated interactions became possible and people became more willing to be interviewed remotely. Our paid social media campaigns in January 2021 were particularly effective in encouraging questionnaire and interview participation. Due to the increasing engagement with the project after social media campaigns, the majority of our sample for this paper was accessed online between January 2021-March 2021 and offers a particular view of COVID19 experiences during this time period. Such a perspective differs from data that can and will be gathered retrospectively.

In this paper, we draw on 40 interviews, and 77 questionnaire answers to the COVID-related questions collected up to March 2021. Interviews were semi-structured and asked about how people experienced their everyday lives, including what spaces they engaged with (both public and private), and any negative and/or positive encounters they had given their views on working 'beyond opposition' (see https://beyondopposition.org/ for full details, ethics forms and privacy policy). Qualitative questionnaire data offered overviews (Browne, 2008) and perspectives that differ from the in-depth insights of interview data. Both are valid research tools in gaining insights into opinions and perceptions of activities.

Questionnaire questions are detailed in Table 1 had 77 responses (from over 300 completed questionnaires). The questions in Table 1 could only be accessed by those who were routed specifically through the questionnaire because they said that they

Table 1. COVID19 questions posed to those who were routed through the full questionnaire.

Thinking about your life under social distancing, lockdown and other measures, has anything changed in how you talk about/express your views about sexualities and gender issues?
Tell us what has changed
Have changes to your everyday life because of the coronavirus affected how you feel about sharing your views about sexualities and gender issues?
Please tell us more (you might want to tell us what has or hasn't changed, how this has affected you, or something else)
Have social distancing, lockdown and/or other recent measures related to coronavirus changed what you do online in relation to sexualities and gender issues?
Please tell us about how these measures have, or have not, changed what you do online

Table 2. Voting questions to route participants through the questionnaire.

. . .please tell us how you would vote on the following issues if you were given the chance. Select the option which most closely represents your views.
• Gay/Same-sex marriage
• Abortion
• Trans people accessing single-sex spaces and activities (e.g., bathrooms)
• Compulsory sex education in schools including teaching about gay/same-sex relationships, and/or gender identity[5]

would vote 'no', to at least one of the questions in Table 2. Although these are very different groupings, for the purposes of this paper we show the ways in which various groups and individuals operated during COVID. Of those initial 77 respondents, 31 were from Canada (named as CA in interviews), 34 from England, Scotland and Wales (named as GB) and 7 from the Republic of Ireland '(named as IRL). For interviews, there were 15 Canada participants, 23 in Great Britian and 2 in the Republic of Ireland.

As Table 1 shows, the questionnaire questions were both quantitative, and qualitative. The qualitative responses were analysed alongside the interview data to offer depth and understanding about how COVID19 was perceived to affect the lives and engagement of those opposed to or concerned about changing sexual and gender norms. The data was coded together from which several themes emerged. These themes were then analysed in relation to how the participants understood and narrated their actions, activities and non-activities in the interviews or through the questionnaires. The purpose is to engage in a critical, reflexive analysis that details an emergent COVID19 Geographies developing within sexual and gendered activisms during the period of data collection. In the context of this paper, this illustrates the ongoing, and in some cases deepening, engagement with participant's views seeking to contest changes to sexual and gender legislation and cultures, including same sex marriage, gender recognition and access to abortion. Thus, we do not divide them via their presumed political affiliations and instead the data was coded to explore the impact of COVID on their views and uses of space and how they negotiated their engagement given changes wrought by COVID19.

Changing Lives/Changing Activisms: Everything changes but me?

Exploring the experiences of participants concerned about or opposed to abortion access, LGBT inclusions and Trans recognition during a global pandemic is inherently spatial. It is also grounded in participant's perceptions of the importance of their views, and how these are affected by COVID19. Key to this is the recognition of the complexity of their engagements and the refusal of simple linear narratives that understand progress in

relation to sexual and gender legislative and cultural changes as inevitable. The majority of questionnaire and some interview participants perceived little change in how they expressed views, in their feelings about these expressions, and the support they received online. However, when the qualitative data is accounted for, a more nuanced picture emerged of what was perceived as change, and by whom. The COVID19 restrictions on everyday lives and engagements may have had little effect for some, but as we will explore in the following sections, for others it was a period of reflection, exploration, and a deepening of online relationships in connection with the development of their activism. Whilst it is perhaps easier to focus on what changed and how, we begin by thinking through what people felt *did not change*, and how they framed this 'lack of change' as a key element of COVID19 regimes that seeks a return to particular heteronormative/sexed 'normals'.

Table 3 shows that of the 77 participants who responded to the question about how COVID19 changed how they expressed their view on gender and sexual changes, 48 said there was no change in how they talked about or expressed their views. In terms of how participants feel about sharing their views, the perceived lack of change was even more pronounced. Fifty-nine people said that their feelings had not changed.[4] When responding to questions about changes to online activities during COVID19 and associated restrictions, 59 people said that they didn't see changes to their support online, while 16 people did. The vast majority (n.61) did not identify changes to the support they received online.

Reflecting on those who answered that they 'don't feel like it has impacted much about what I do' (CA interview 17) or their views and how they express them illustrates that the changes brought by COVID19 may not shift perceptions or actions around shifting sexual and gender norms. Because: 'Nothing has changed for me I still feel the same and I'm still expressing my views like normal.' (questionnaire response), and lockdown 'hasn't affected what I do online' (questionnaire), the desire and actions to recuperate what is felt to be 'lost' through changes to sexual and gender norms remain in place, especially online. The changes 'for me' and affecting what 'I' do shows an individual's lack of transformation in what can be seen as a time of extensive upheaval. When individuals hold firm in this way, they can indicate the intractability of their views (Nash & Browne, 2020), as well as how they are expressed. Indicating a continuity with their views on sexual and gender norms, this 'I' continues what are seen as the same fights: 'I still argue with them, they carry on spouting the same bullshit' (questionnaire). 'They' also remain the same in this understanding, and are dismissed on the same terms ('spouting bullshit').

Table 3. Responses to quantitative questions (note given the low number percentages are not used to void presumptions of the representativeness of the data).

Question	Yes	No	Don't know
Has anything changed in how you talk about/express your views about sexualities and gender issues?	28	48	1
Have changes to your everyday life because of the coronavirus affected how you feel about sharing your views about sexualities and gender issues?	15	59	
Have social distancing, lockdown and/or other recent measures related to coronavirus changed what you do online in relation to sexualities and gender issues?	16	59	1
Support received online	4	61	9

Similarly, most (n.61) perceived little change in the support they received online: 'The people I talk to online are still there, nothing changed' (questionnaire). Other respondents told us that they 'don't look for support online' (questionnaire) and asserted that they 'don't usually share my views with others, this hasn't affected my life much' (questionnaire). This lack of sharing and hidden views for these respondents links with the next section, where participants spoke of avoiding conflict, recognising that their views might not be shared, or appreciated either before or during COVID19.

The intense spatial adjustments of COVID did not go unrecognised in this 'unchanging' groups: some acknowledged an 'increase in online interactions and a decrease in in-person interactions' (questionnaire) with 'a bit more time online now that I'm stuck at home' (questionnaire). Nonetheless, a common assertion throughout the questionnaire data was that was that 'nothing changed' (questionnaire). These perceptions indicate desire for continuity, and 'normality' that are key to COVID19 geographies and are linked to the desire to resist prevailing views around sexualities and genders in Canada, GB and Ireland. Participant's narratives indicate a keenness to demonstrate holding firm to their views and opinions even in the face of new possible worlds brought COVID19 regimes. Participants did, however, perceive wider changes occurring through become 'increasingly aware' of issues that the participants supported (questionnaire) and some spoke of receiving more Twitter followers and more support/shared views online. Thus, the perceptions were that COVID19 Geographies had altered other people, whilst these participants did not change, because they believe their views to be right.

'Distracted by other things': Disengaging and Downplaying Sexual and Gender Issues in COVID19 times

Alongside those who saw no change were those who understood there to be a de-emphasising of sexual and gendered politics as the global pandemic that fundamentally altered the geographies of our everyday lives took centre stage. The emphasis was on how COVID19 and the related lockdowns reduced the intensity of engagements with issues such as abortion, where people are:

> 'distracted by so many other things. They're more worried about who's wearing a mask or things like that than about what I think about abortion. So I feel like it's definitely it's lessened because they're just they're thinking about other things. Yeah, even news and everything media posts are just directed that way as well.' (CAinterview17).

Where people are distracted, activities that emphasise abortion politics can appear less fruitful.[5] A disengagement can also be seen in people's everyday spatialities. Aspects of sexual and gender cultures that participants found problematic and which they encountered as they moved through spaces were no longer 'in my face every day' (CAinterview22). Further, some respondents made a conscious choice to avoid associated debates and discussions:

> I like disabled Facebook for a while, to not have to deal with it [arguments about sexual/gender politics]. So all in all during, COVID19 slightly less time engaging in things online just because I'm a bit more conscious of things that are needless stresses and trying to remove them. (CAinterview21)

This desire not to 'deal with' a 'needless stressor' makes sexual and gender politics 'needless' for some respondents during COVID19 times. The 'needless stressor' of online debates were often located within the 'cesspit' (questionnaire) of social media that can generate 'harassment' (questionnaire). Even those who said that they were 'much more online' during the pandemic, sought to stay 'clear of the braying mobs of woketivists online' (Questionnaire). This indicates a specific form of mediated COVID19 Geographies that seek *less engagement* with sexual and gender debates where their views are challenged.

The ability to disengage from mediated online spaces was seen as different to interactions in physical spaces prior to COVID19 which were necessary, and at times less avoidable:

> I was with two couples, one very longstanding friends and friends of theirs who I didn't really know. And we did get into quite a heated conversation that the male half of the couple was very challenging. . . . So I suppose in a way that's a good thing that lockdown happened! So those kind of meetings have been on hold. I'm sure it would happen again. (GBinterview10)

COVID19 Geographies that prioritise online interactions were seen as having the advantage of not being challenged during face-to-face encounters with other people. This, together with being able to avoid online interactions (which was welcomed by some) indicates a reduction in activism that directly engages with those who support changes to sexual and gender norms. Thus, COVID19 Geographies are manifest for some through *less* participation in sexual and gender politics through not having to engage in face-to-face encounters and limiting online discussions about sexualities and genders. In these cases, personal COVID19 Geographies were resituated away from the emotional spatialities of political engagements, articulated through terms such as 'harassment' and 'needless' allowing for a respite which most assume is temporary. This temporary nature speaks to the specifics of COVID19 as a time marked by difference where things have shifted and the responses associated with that shift. The 'pause' in activities and activisms was clear in participant's responses, rather than seeing their state at the time of engaging with the research as a permanent feature.

Reducing Physical Connections and the Difficulties of Maintaining Activisms in COVID19 times

The disengagement response to COVID19 is linked to the reduced availability and use of public spaces for political engagements to work against or express concern about sexual and gender changes. However, as this section will show, participants seeking to contest changes to sexual and gender norms are resourceful in engaging with mediated spaces. Their careful reworking indicates their desire and passion that are key in the constitution of sexual and gendered political landscapes. Thus, whilst it is clear that for some the issues (and their views on them) haven't changed, for those seeking to work towards change both legislatively and culturally, their activism during COVID19 did alter considerably. In this section, we explore the losses that those who can be considered activists (that is those who actively campaign and work to resist sexual and gendered legislative and cultural changes) experienced. This relates directly to their everyday lives and spatialities and was

understood in terms of their engagement both on and off line, as well as the possibilities that arose for them to pursue their goals.

The loss of social media platforms before and during the pandemic has significant effects for activisms that are deemed inappropriate for these platforms as Meghan said:[6]

> When I'm engaging online, I do have to be more careful about the words that I choose because I'm so dependent on social media platforms in order to do my work and make a living. So I can't afford to be banned from more spaces. So I have to sort of pick and choose my words more carefully. Whereas if I'm speaking in real life, whether that's to a friend or to an audience or even in an interview with somebody, I know I'm pretty forthright about exactly what I think and don't feel like I have to be so careful about the kinds of words that I use in that way. All right. So I guess I mean, I guess that would connect to lockdown only in that I'm engaging in real less than I was pre-COVID
>
> (CAinterview05)

Whilst social media was a key activist platform prior to COVID19, spatial restrictions required an increasing reliance on social media for engaging with broad audiences beyond public spaces (e.g., public protests, conferences or face-to-face events). Because of their views, their continued activism required careful engagement with online spaces to communicate their message and maintain/develop their support base. Key to this was avoiding being seen as breaking 'community standards', particularly where activists had already been removed from one social media platform (such as Twitter) and needed to maintain their presence on others which, in some cases, was tied to their incomes. This care in online, mediated spaces is differentiated from the possibilities of engaging people with their message in physical face-to-face interactions. This participant indicated different boundaries and less constraint in 'real spaces' because they are not subject to the same sanctions that can reduce their audience. Indeed, exclusions from public spaces can be used to mobilise around 'Freedom of speech' arguments and often expanding their audiences (Nash & Browne, 2020; Nash et al., 2021), whereas social media bans limit their ability to get their messages out to grow their base. Thus, newly emergent COVID19 Geographies reflect lost face-to-face engagements which are keenly felt, as when activists such as these are banned from physical spaces, they can increase their reach highlighting this ban. In contrast, the removal from social media spaces where public gatherings are banned makes mobilisation more difficult as they need the platforms they are banned from to mobilise a reaction to their ban.

Alongside the need to be careful in online spaces, COVID19 Geographies were perceived as losing the face-to-face forging of practices, affects and connections so crucial in activisms:

> I really miss doing in-person events. Like it's waaay different than doing online events. Like it feels a lot more galvanizing to do it in-person events and to meet everybody and have conversations face to face with all these people . . . I feel like it's a more productive, humane way to engage. So, yeah, I think covid's had a negative impact on the conversation and debate and stuff like that.
>
> (CAinterview05)

Keeping in mind that a central activist tactic to oppose sexual and gender legislative changes is the creation of space to voice these views (Nash & Browne, 2020), COVID19

spatialities that restrict in-person events have broad effects on the possibilities of their work. These are read as created through 'conversation and debate' with to *whom* you can have these conversations.

One GB participant spoke of how COVID19 Geographies, for them, lead to fewer opportunities to directly influence pivotal key figures. Thus, alongside those in the section above who saw value in avoiding unanticipated conflict in everyday spaces, there were those who saw opportunities arise in 'the medium of the coffee shop' and other informal spaces where discussions and conversations could be used to further their cause. This was particularly true where they could use such spaces and face-to-face interactions to introduce themselves to key governmental and other influential figures and explain their cause to them. This has, in their minds, resulted in issues being raised in parliament following the sharing physical space. Thus, 'Sophie said real life flesh and blood material reality' of sharing physical space was seen as critical to communication and connection in ways that are lost 'via a screen' (GBinterview6).

The lost relationalities of engaging with strangers through face-to-face interactions and reduced connections through physical 'flesh and blood' connections are defining features of COVID19 Geographies. This has direct effects on activism, including street activism undertaken by pro-life groups and others who use public space to influence general publics, as well as key decision makers. The 'flesh and blood material' is not only in the interactions with others and what can be said, but also in forms of street activisms about can be represented visually – both are not subject to the same sanctions that they can be on social media. Thus, COVID19 Geographies speak to the losses of physical and public spaces and the connections that create, invigorate and given fleshy materialities to activisms, which are exacerbated where social media interactions have to be curtailed.

'More time and Energy': Increasing Activisms through COVID19 Time/Space

The constitution of newly emergent COVID19 geographies can be understood as more than simply the loss of physical spaces and the requirement to function in potentially more constraining on line spaces. For some activists, COVID19 regimes provided or created more time to engage in various forms of activism with some respondents noting that they felt more motivated to engage in activism. Rather than seeing these issues as dissipating, these participants said that they brought their concerns to the fore. COVID Geographies are a key aspect of the relational reconstitution of these activisms. These experiences and activisms are not stable or static, but neither are they dissipating, indeed this section shows how they grew over the pandemic for some. This reiteration and recuperation of hetero, gender critical and pro-life activisms suggest renewed vigour around these issues that post-pandemic analyses will need to further explore.

Alongside the losses felt by Sophie regarding the fleshy connections that created his activisms, he noted his use of online spaces that went beyond the 'plotting and planning' to create connections, belonging and community:

> I was a little bit frustrated because I imagined us all to be, you know full on activists who were plotting and planning the overthrow of whatever. But of course, it very quickly transmogrifies into sharing recipes online and pictures of dogs and jokes and all the rest of it . . . I came to realize how important that was actually, in fact probably in a lot of ways more important because it allows you an emotional space to tap into. And when people reveal themselves

> through telling a risqué joke or sharing a picture of their kid online or having a cry online or what have you, it develops trust. So then, you know, that you can when you do talk about something serious. If they're still there in the conversation it's because you trust one another and that you can you can do a lot of that online actually I've been quite surprised you know it still doesn't beat meeting up and having a coffee and a hug
>
> (GBInterview6)

Online communications can be seen as reiterating and strengthening connections and communities, despite the loss of face-to-face encounters. The relationalities between strangers, friends and activists colleagues challenge assertions of the displacing of sexualities and genders as central considerations during COVID19. Indeed, many activists in our data continue to work to 'overthrow' the changes to sexual and gender legislation and cultures that they perceive as negatively affecting their lives and broader society.

For some, the shifts during the pandemic were not directly associated with Covid19 regimes or their effects on their everyday geographies. Instead, participants discussed having feelings of urgency and that it was 'necessary to do something useful' (questionnaire), such that over the course of COVID19 they understood themselves as becoming 'radicalized' (GBinterview8). These changes were not necessarily attributed to lockdown or COVID19, instead happening in COVID19 times, and the mediated technologies that were necessitated as Richard said:

> This time last year, I don't think I would've called myself an activist, but now I definitely do because I'm so alarmed at what I see.
>
> I'm certainly putting a lot more time and energy into actual doing things and not just moaning about stuff on Twitter. . . . I started out email campaigns and so on, which had some fairly big results.
>
> I definitely increased my activism. I don't know whether that's linked to lockdown or just my growing sense of unease about what is being left to go unchallenged
>
> (GBinterview10)

Participants were clear that their increased strength of feeling and engagement went beyond 'engaging with twitter'. The depth of feeling was palpable in some of the data. For example, participants noted how social media bans made them more determined. They now considered themselves activist, because 'We can't give up on this' (questionnaire) and given that 'human dignity' was more important during lockdown and COVID, they were now 'more assertive about asking for colleagues to consider my views' (questionnaire). Therefore, alongside the pressures felt by those whose activities had been curtailed by the move online and away from physical spaces, were those who felt that COVID regimes had increased their activisms and motivations to undertake this work. Some participants argued that there 'needed to be immediate action' (questionnaire).

Alongside the increasing feelings of urgency, participants spoke of having the time to investigate their concerns on their own terms, often in online spaces that supported their views and in talking (mainly online) to 'similar-thinking people' (questionnaire). Becoming more 'educated' was a key theme in the questionnaire, including engaging in international (online) conferences which made people 'angrier, braver, more determined' (questionnaire). Through this, they perceived themselves as becoming more aware and

developing more confidence to 'share more considered opinions' (questionnaire). This was the case even where people felt that nothing had changed for them or how they express their opinions. For others, the confidence meant that they felt able to challenge and speak about their views in ways that had not been possible for them prior to using COVID19 time to develop their views so that they are now 'feeling more confident to speak to friends and family about the issue' (questionnaire). They spoke of feeling 'braver'. This points to the constitution of more invigorated connections as people find mutual support with like-minded individuals across spatial difference. Thus, for some, COVID19 gave them the time to foster their opposition to and concern about sexual and gender changes through transnational engagements that contributed to the evolution of their views.

This increasing activism was specific to forms of sexual and gender politics encompassed in this research. The 'radicalisation' discussed in this section, was often linked to issues around trans inclusions, acceptances and rights and associated implications for 'women's space' (Jones & Slater, 2020; Pearce et al., 2020b). For some respondents, the supposed sexed or biological differences in the manifestations and effects of the COVID19 virus was read as proof of the 'undeniable' existence of biological dichotomised sex based on a men and women's bodies. Regardless of the accuracy of their claims, this perception made it 'more acceptable to talk about sex difference and women's rights' because 'sex is important' (questionnaire).

Conclusion

COVID19 has been shown to deepen pre-existing inequalities, and further isolate groups that rely on physical spaces for political and social purposes, including LGBTIQ+ people (Davenport et al., 2020; Brickell, 2020, July 8; Grant et al., 2021). This paper develops the notion of COVID19 Geographies to examine and understand the effects of COVID19 regimes on everyday lives, specifically for those who are opposed to or concerned about changes to sexual and gender norms in Canada, Great Britian and Ireland. In focusing on their perceptions, we have shown that the effects of COVID19 on engagements and activism are heterogenous. There are differences in the losses and upticks of activisms, as well as the import of the loss/gains of reduced physical proximities and interactions.

The diversity of responses and emergent COVID19 Geographies for those opposed to sexual and gendered political and social changes indicates a desire for sameness, for a lack of change, a downplaying of both the disruption and the spatial reconfiguring and associated sexual and gendered politics. Those who saw no change in their lives did not equate this to a lack of change more broadly. Instead, change was perceived to be external to them, such that they, and their views around sexualities and genders, remained largely unaffected. For others, the change they saw was a reduced attention/engagement in part because sexuality and gender has little to do with these changes. Simultaneously, various disruptions lead to the creation, intensification and reformation of activisms. The recuperation and heightening of some activisms through mediated technologies poses questions about where the disruptions to everyday lives will lead and the effects that these will have, which requires further attention.

Overall, COVID19 regimes contracted time-spaces in ways that were felt as a loss, and in the avoidance of certain online spaces. Alongside this was a form of expansive 'COVID19 time', where some participants developed and honed their engagements. This paper offers a preliminary understanding of the broad reach and impact of COVID19, within the specific moment in time it addresses. Further, and complementary work, is needed to explore the experiences of those who are supportive of LGBTIQ+, pro-choice and other activists' work during COVID19 regimes and the effects of these shifts beyond this specific time to fully examine how sexual and gender landscapes emerge and are redefined into the future. Moreover, the focus here has been on sexualities and gendered activisms that contest legislations and cultural changes, but it is likely that these elements of COVID19 Geographies could be more broadly applicable. We look forward to others who might extend and develop these initial examinations in other areas.

Notes

1. Beyond Opposition is an ERC funded project (Project number 817897) started in October 2019 and is further described in the methods.
2. At the time of writing (Autumn 2021), a search of COVID19 and activism brings up more than 34,000 results. A search of geographies and COVID19 results in greater than 24,000, and a search of COVID19 and sexualities provides more than 2,400 results.
3. Ethics approval granted from University College Dublin, approval number: HS-19-51-Browne; Brock University, clearance reference: 19-021-Browne and University of Brighton, 2019-2721-Browne Beyond Opposition.
4. This included 42 of those who said no to changes in how they discuss these views and 16 of those who felt that there was a difference in how they spoke about their views. Separately, of the 15 who said that their feelings about sharing their views had changed, 4 of those indicated that nothing had changed in relation to how they express their views, yet their feelings had changed.
5. Whilst the focus of this paper is not on specific campaigns or strategies, it is relevant to note that there is a geography to this. In England, organisations such as Christian Concern mounted campaigns to stop the at-home availability of abortion pills, linking this directly to social distancing/pandemic responses. This was not the case in Canada, indicating that what is activists and others 'worried about' was not uniform across specific social and political geographies.
6. As part of ethical processes of this research participants were given the option of having their words associated with their name. First names are used to this end.

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