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## I never want to see the word “COVIDIOT” again

Darya Rustamova

March 24, 2020

*A disclaimer first. I have shit lungs and I’ve always had shit lungs, I’m chronically ill and the threat of not being able to breathe has been constant throughout my life, I am personally taking this pandemic very, very seriously and everyone should stay at home and ideally enforce a rent strike. However, like most people my age, lately I have spent a lot of time on Twitter (and drinking oat milk and using emojis and not owning property and ruining the world etc. etc.) and I’m frustrated by what I’m seeing.*

*A second disclaimer, I started writing this before the lockdown was announced, and finished just after. It’s really inconvenient getting relevant ground-breaking, unprecedented, history-in-the-making breaking news while writing.*

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Dear all, please, try and stop blaming each other for the problems caused by capitalism. Calling each other selfish and greedy is misdirected and this anger is disrupting our sense of community at a time when it has never been more necessary.

Many of us have reasonably been shouting “self-isolate! Practise social distancing now!” because loads of young, healthy people are probably carrying a symptomless fatal illness and infecting other more vulnerable people and our healthcare systems will collapse as a result.

Others are posting photos of empty supermarket shelves, products being Out of Stock online, endless virtual Ocado queues, and people with trolleys full of toilet roll, with accusatory captions labelling the anonymous masses selfish, inconsiderate, or greedy.

Some of us have already been told to stay indoors for 12 weeks because our underlying health conditions make us more vulnerable to a severe illness or death if we catch COVID-19 and we alone could overwhelm the nation’s healthcare system within minutes. That means some of us had to quickly gather 12 weeks’ worth of food. Some of us are facing months ahead without any paid work and we aren’t sure when our next paycheck will be. Some of us have lived through wars, famines, prison sentences, earthquakes, and already have tendencies toward hoarding. Some of us are otherwise simply anxious and panicked about what lies ahead. Some of us can only eat specific meals. Some of us soon won’t be able to afford food. Some of us already can’t afford food.

Some of us are sharing photos of overcrowded public transport, asking how people could be so selfish, stay home, distance yourself, why are you going out?!

Some of us couldn’t risk losing our jobs or another day’s pay. Some of us need to get to a hospital across town to get our routine injections, scans, or blood tests, or to pick up medicine for our isolated friends and family. Some of us still had to attend meetings at the probation office. Some of us can’t prioritise our own, our loved ones’, and public health.

outdoors for the next 2 years, and while I'm writing this, lockdown has finally been introduced. All of which is being followed up with a "well we gave people a chance but the blighters are still going outdoors aren't they". We all have a responsibility to each other, but they can't pin this whole crisis on us. The party which spent decades dismantling and disempowering the NHS is now telling us that staying home will protect it. After weeks of not listening to expert advice, refusing widespread testing, refusing even the most basic supplementary income, refusing all the measures that have been proven to have worked elsewhere, now our country's leaders are suggesting it's because we, "the people didn't listen". The Tories specialise in both evasive and divisive language and they're shifting the onus onto us all.

Don't blame the crisis on your neighbours, blame it on the greed of our esteemed ministers putting their profits before our lives. Foster a sense of community and help each other to navigate this crisis (because Boris certainly won't). Stay at home. Call your mum. Get a milkman. Support your local mutual aid networks.

*I will accept all challenges to this, partly because I have a lot of time on my hands to argue with people online, but also because I am really annoyed about the farmer's market crowds too, and I want my anger to be justified.*

*I'm also aware that the COVID-19 pandemic shouldn't be read via Twitter discourse analysis or any other platform requiring short snappy >280 character takes and I should seek my information elsewhere.*

Meanwhile, some of us were still going out to crowded Shoreditch farmer's markets for some reason.<sup>1</sup> Some of us were exponentially raising the prices of toilet roll in our own shops for some reason. Some of us were uploading TikTok videos of ourselves licking fruit and vegetables in the supermarkets for some reason! (!?!?!?!)?

I'm not going to defend them, there is a very persistent and unacceptable sense of entitlement among a certain type of Brit who thinks only within a frame of individualism. And Farmer's markets are already kind of annoying with or without a pandemic (I don't know why, but they are). It was hard to be sat at home knowing we're sacrificing our social lives, our springtime, our mental health, and for some, our wages, while watching videos online of non-essential, trivial, inconsiderate mass gatherings of people who look completely oblivious to what's going on.

As enraging as this is, can we blame people for not taking this government's advice seriously?

*Johnson just announced a full, nationwide lockdown and #COVID-IOTS is trending again. I never want to see this word again.*

The state response to the COVID-19 crisis has been confusing, pathetic, inconsistent, ill-advised, and filled with U-turns. The government is taking daily risks with our lives and our loved ones, and it's no surprise that some of the general public have been following suit. The advice is chaotic, some of us will follow it chaotically.

For over a week, the government has been dangling the threat of imminent lockdown over London. People, especially those most vulnerable, have been stockpiling as a result. This city is filled with people who have never had to feel scared of not having food, and those who always have. On the whole, London has never been so anxious and the state response has been less than adequate. When the government randomly closed a few underground stations in

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<sup>1</sup> *I can't find much justification for the farmer's markets because I'm still really annoyed about them. Maybe people swarmed to the farmer's markets because the supermarkets were so low on food? Maybe they are all just posh entitled wankers.*

London, the neighbouring stations were packed full. When the government reduced train services, the remaining carriages were busier than ever. When they close the parks, the marshes and wetlands will be full because public health authorities have assured us that going for a walk is fine. When communications are vague and confusing, supermarkets and petrol stations are overwhelmed with panicked people stocking up for the unknown.

Without clear guidance, people won't be able to take sufficient precautions. I know, everyone should look at what's going on in Italy now, what's been going on in Wuhan for months, France, Spain, South Korea, Vietnam, and take their own initiative to benefit the greater good. But some of us only listen to the news on Sunday mornings. Some of us read the Metro every day. Some of us spend all day on Twitter and some don't even have Twitter. Some of us only get our news from our aunties on WhatsApp (God help us). Some of us don't have regular access to the internet. Some people (although probably only the one person I know of specifically) are actually too busy working night shifts driving lorries and listening to Game of Thrones audiobooks on repeat to really understand the gravity of this pandemic. The success or failures of managing a public health crisis isn't really down to every individual.

Of course, some people do have a thorough understanding of what's going on and they just don't give a fuck about anyone else, like The Conservative party, the Wetherspoons senior leadership team, Peter Hitchens, probably Sir Alan Sugar, and all the people who went to the fucking Cheltenham Festival races. But these people aren't your neighbourhood Tesco shoppers.

The government still hasn't provided any clarity or guidance for people who are self-employed, on zero-hours contracts, unemployed, or who have lost/will lose work because of COVID-19. The government *has* provided multi-million pound protections for business owners and property owners. So far, there are no protections given for workers and renters. (The 80% supplementary wages is a grant for business owners, not for staff. The decision to pay this is

in the hands of the business owners). A nationwide lockdown has been announced, with no mention of how people will have enough money to rent and eat. This is still a disaster.

It has been maddening to see crowds of people watching Stereophonics or climbing Mt. Snowdon or buying another pot of pointless artisan jam. It's really annoying having a chronic illness which requires you to self-isolate yet not being able to buy a big bag of pasta anywhere. I can't explain how it feels to see people on WhatsApp groups with no medical training tell others to "buy salamol inhalers because they can cure coronavirus" (they can not) and in turn you find there are no salamol inhalers left because people who don't have asthma or COPD have bought them all! I'm trying to work out what to do with the frustration because aiming it at my fellow Londoners queued up in hot cars trying to reverse bay park in the most stressful Aldi car park in Britain (Leyton Aldi, it's you) doesn't seem right. I can't blame old ladies on WhatsApp for feeling a moment of hope and clarity in the completely false notion that an inhaler will help, when they feel like nobody else is helping them.

I think our anger has to be directed at the government which continued to fail us every day despite being there, apparently, for our protection. This isn't the time to foster tensions between people. The woman next door who has 3 kids at home and a partner who is on lockdown in Milan, your local supermarket cashier, the takeaway delivery guy, the Royal Mail lady, the Plymouth Brethren down the street who have no idea what's going on and just wanted to go to Church, the elderly man you always see feeding pigeons, they all need our collective empathy and support. This isn't going to be achieved by calling each other selfish and greedy on the internet.

The Tory Party are already employing language which blames other people for the worsening situation. Johnson is threatening to send out military personnel to make sure the sick and elderly stay isolated, he's introduced new powers to arrest sick people for going