

## Contagion - The Truth of the Matter



The World Health Organisation has now declared the current outbreak of novel coronavirus known as COVID-19 a pandemic. They were slow to act. But at least this puts officials in every country on a new level of alertness. It changes very little else.

Global supply chains continue to be severed, large events cancelled, small businesses, especially those that rely on tourists, are shutting their doors, beaches, airports and shopping malls are deserted, as people change their travel plans, work from home, and generally impose their own quarantine

The mood in some countries seems to shift daily. Official notices and reporting in Thailand, for example, have been mostly low key and unflustered. At this stage, a comforting reassurance prevails. Even in Bangkok, the only sign that something untoward is going on is the number of people wearing face masks. Realising that misleading information can lead to panic, and that both could have enervating effects on the national psyche, authorities here have opted for messages exuding a composure that seems to fly in the face of the latest news from countries like Korea and Italy. So how much can we trust information that is so conflicted?

Nobody can say for sure if the current outbreak is the plague we have constantly been warned about - a global pandemic, like the deadly Spanish flu outbreak of 1918, that infected about one-third of the world's population and killed anywhere between 20-50 million people.

Countries having to deal with the problem range from Armenia and Luxembourg to Iceland and Indonesia. If this is in any way similar to Spanish Flu, especially given the casually itinerant nature of today's populace, it could theoretically claim hundreds of millions of victims.

Fear and uncertainty are causing most of the reactions - some verging on panic. The totality of action across the spectrum of government departments, health professionals, the WHO, event organizers, tour operators, airlines, and individual businesses, has been clumsy and confusing. Officials telling people not to panic is, of course, not at all helpful. There have even been a few

instances of government ministers diverting attention from their own problems by using the spread of COVID-19 as a scare tactic.

Corporate media adds to the confusion. The appetite for alarmist headlines is an obsession, irrespective of the topic. Putting things into perspective, by publishing pertinent and accurate data, is no longer seen to be their most seminal role in a world where profit is king. Actually sensationalism, infused with contradictory information and the wildest of misinterpretations, is in itself a contagion (within the neoliberal context) for which we have not yet found a cure.

The hardest part is trying to find pertinent and precise information, putting all of it into valid perspectives, prior to responding strategically, with just the right amount of insight, as well as sensibly, with just the right amount of caution. In some ways panic could be a worse outcome than the pandemic itself - peremptorily curtailing travel and shutting down the production of essential goods. As China is responsible for producing around 28 per cent of the world's manufactures it would be surprising if the supply chains of essential drugs, medical oxygen and surgical masks were not impacted in some way.

Indeed, without due care and coordination, the surfeit of inconsistent public health warnings and travel advisory messages we are currently subject to through various channels aimed, no doubt, at jolting people out of their usual complacency, can all too readily add to the sense of dread that seems to be building steadily.

How is one expected to gauge the reality and scale of the emergency with all of the deceptive data taking so much air time? Because of various postponements and cancellations throwing my schedule for the coming months into disarray, I am at home in my village enjoying a quiet time to write and recharge. I feel anxious yet impatient. Should I be concerned, as isolated as we are from the nearest city? Should I fly down to Bangkok, as some are suggesting, in order to stock up on indispensable medicines? How long is any lock down likely to last? How close are we to discovering a vaccine?

Much of our anxiety from questions like these borders on the irrational. Yet it is still sufficiently corrosive as to disrupt the routines of ordinary people in the most extraordinary manner. In several countries, towns are being put on immediate lockdown, curfews are being imposed, public gatherings banned, sports events held behind closed doors, and schools closed.

Local businesses that rely on tourism are already reeling. Months of inactivity could easily send them out of business for good. Even some very large corporations, like the Asian airlines for example, are worried. The impact on international travel and the leisure industry could well be devastating. In addition, fears of an uncontrollable pandemic, amplified by wrong information and gossip, is causing trust in public institutions to erode still further.

What can we conclude and how should we act when the intensity and force of fear becomes a far greater threat than any virus?

We should avoid being reckless or unduly cavalier, of course. Conducting business-as-usual is out of the question. On the other hand, antiretroviral treatments are already showing promise while around 20 research teams around the world are racing to find a vaccine. As yet, there is no need to change our entire way of life because a few people have been infected.

To put things into perspective. Tens of thousands die each year from severe seasonal flu. The COVID-19 virus is more contagious than most forms of flu. Each person with the virus appears to infect 2.2 other people. However, even that information is not totally accurate owing to the early mismanagement of the outbreak in Wuhan.

So far, the death rate is thought to be around 1.4% of those infected - around 2,915 people from 80,174 diagnosed infections. This could be higher, if we have been given misleading figures, or lower, if and when we are able to factor in mild or symptom-free cases that remain undetected.

Naturally even a low death rate can take its toll if the number of infections escalates globally. This past week, for the first time, the number of new infections outside China were greater than those in China. That is certainly an ominous sign and a strong indication it will still take months to bring this virus under control.

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