

## Contagion 2 - Opportunities in the Noise



The World Health Organisation has belatedly declared the current outbreak of novel coronavirus COVID-19 a pandemic. It can be argued they were slow to act. But at least this now puts officials in every country on a new level of alertness. The reason for the declaration is the alarming speed and severity of the outbreak globally - together with the relative inaction (including the wrong actions) from governments.

The WHO announcement actually changes little else, apart from grabbing our attention and amplifying socio-economic patterns that were already beginning to unravel, mostly for other reasons - the pressure on systems of production from the quest for endless economic growth; the globalisation of transportation, both people and goods; the promise of happiness at the end of the consumer rainbow; the pollution of air, water and oceans arising from the use of fossil fuel energy and plastics; etc.

The next few months will be critical as the disruption to community habits and routines escalates. Global supply chains have already been severed and large public events continue to be cancelled. Small businesses, especially those totally reliant on tourists, are shutting their doors. Some may not recover. Beaches, airports and malls are deserted as people alter travel arrangements, work from home, and self-quarantine as best they can. And yet most responses are simply herd mentality expedience subscribing to habit and mimicry rather than data-driven evidence.

Officials are still conflicted in their views regarding the severity of this pandemic. Much of what we think we know is still speculative. Nobody can say for sure if this is the epic killer plague scientists had been predicting. Personally, I am inclined to believe that more dangerous pathogens, possibly thousands of years old, are still waiting for us, trapped in layers of permafrost under the Tibetan plateau. If that is so, they will be released into the air as glaciers melt from a heating climate, no doubt taking us by surprise in terms of their source, infection and mortality rates.

Meanwhile there is much we can learn from the current situation.

### **Media Reportage:**

As I previously pointed out, the popular press thrives on drama as much as social media. This issue is not one we should treat lightly. It is not easy getting to the truth these days. Pure fabrication, slip-ups, rumours, propaganda, half truths, outlandish conspiracy theories and hysterical headlines, jumbled up with a few cherry-picked facts, cause a level of confusion that is distressing and totally unnecessary.

It could be argued that the constant histrionic commentary, together with the manner in which even official announcements are broadcast, right down to a carefully crafted syntax, is causing as much anxiety and potential panic as the virus itself. Set against much of the restrained coverage from hospital wards and emergency clinics around the world where, in spite of the stress and demands being made on exhausted staff, a sense of relative calm prevails, that is incongruous.

Once again it raises the question of how we find unbiased, data-driven evidence, and act upon it, amongst all the hubbub and pandemonium of a global crisis. Perhaps it is time to institute a multi-national "emergency response" unit to deal with global existential emergencies. Armed with the necessary legal authority to overrule sovereign states, this body would coordinate data; validate reports; synthesise and broadcast life-saving information; and instruct all sectors of society on how best to deal with any emergency. Even now this might be a positive step for dealing with the issue of climate catastrophe.

### **Patent Law:**

Some people are heartened by the fact there are several teams around the world racing to find a vaccine for this dangerous disease. What is not often realized is that these scientists are working for private companies and are in competition with each other. This means that if and when a vaccine is found it will be patented immediately, becoming the property of a commercial enterprise focused only on making profits from that vaccine.

More than likely any vaccine discovered will be cheap to manufacture. However there can be no guarantee that it will be available at a reasonable cost when it becomes available on the market. Any company that has a government-granted monopoly has the key to fabulous riches. And should any other company produce a similar vaccine in competition with the patent holder then that entity will most probably be sued. That is commercial competition after all.

Better alternatives do exist. But they challenge the entire ethos of predatory capitalism. Might it not be wise, in times of any existential threat to our species, to quarantine certain laws until the crisis has passed? For example, a vaccine would undoubtedly be discovered much faster if all these scientists currently competing against each other were able to collaborate and share their information instead. For that to become viable, competitive behaviour would need to be held in abeyance; alternative mechanisms for funding (in this case) biomedical research would need to be agreed - although that could be done through direct public funding; while monopolistic patent laws would need to be overturned, possibly entrusting ownership of any discoveries to the commons, for a period of time.

### **Collective Conditioning:**

Whenever there is a shift in our collective conditioning there is a predictable reaction. Known and expected patterns invariably lead to complacency, and then to hubris. But when these patterns are disrupted unpredictably, and suddenly, the thermometer of apprehension rapidly rises. Negativity and anxiety can easily take hold in that environment. When that occurs, opportunities are drowned by the sheer scale of the risk of doing anything different.

The level of disruption we will encounter over the coming months is almost unprecedented. The only certainty I can see is that familiar patterns will continue to unravel in the most unsettling ways.

Most individual and corporate mindsets will turn to caution and frugality. But we should also be mindful of opportunities: chaotic conditions invariably offer the most insightful of us a chance to change things for the better and to usher in a new order.

For example, it is no coincidence that the impact of the coronavirus in Wuhan city, which caused the lockdown of the entire Hubei region, resulted in the shutdown of all industrial production. In turn that allowed the skies over the region to brighten, and the air to recover from human activity by becoming less polluted. Having experienced that, it would be foolish for officials in Hubei not to be reconsidering what they need to do to preserve such healthy conditions without compromising the local economy.

For some people this will be a chance to move off-the-grid in order to lead a different kind of life. For commercial entities it might be a chance to pause, to shift direction, scale down, or recalibrate strategy. It also offers each one of us the chance to re-evaluate what being human means in such a globalised age of entanglement. It offers us a chance to decide what we actually need in order to remain contented and prosperous too. For this is a time of reflection and of learning. A time we must not waste.

Richard David Hames

A Strategic Intelligence Briefing from The Centre for the Future