Covid, pandemics, plague and public affairs: Lessons from history

The worldwide Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has presented an unprecedented set of health and increasing economic challenges for countries around the world. As infection rates have soared to over 46 million world-wide with deaths related to coronavirus reaching almost 2 million at the time of writing. Governments around the world have sought to find ways to suppress the spread of the virus by driving down the so-called “R” rate of virus transmission through a series of national and regional “lockdowns” designed to create a so-called “firebreak” that would slow the transmission rate. Such measures are designed to essentially “buy some time” for an effective vaccine to be developed that can help immunise the population against the coronavirus.

It is of course, a fundamental responsibility of government to determine and oversee the implementation of policies designed to protect the health, well-being and safety of their populations as well as their economic prosperity. It is here that the impact of coronavirus has created some genuine dilemmas for governments of all complexities: attempting to balance health imperatives with genuine concern about the short and long-term economic impact of lockdown measures on the economic prosperity and even survival of many businesses and individuals. Moreover, as a second wave of infection associated with the pandemic has continued to devastate countries across Europe as well as around the world, governments are facing the additional challenge of maintaining public order and compliance with policies designed to address the impact of the pandemic.

Arguably it is here that a public affairs perspective offers a valuable “lens” through which to observe the ways which governments have sought to respond to the impact of coronavirus, attempting to balance the interests of all the various stakeholder groups, which at times has involved adopting unpopular policies in the short term, particularly in terms of quite harsh and restrictive lockdown measures imposed across Europe in response to the arrival of a second wave of coronavirus. The outbreak of violent demonstrations in Spain and Italy following the imposition of further restrictions on movement and social activities as infection rates have soared, arguably could be attributed to a failure of the respective governments’ communication strategies in winning over the hearts and minds of large sections of their populations, who have turned to violent protest to express their frustrations and dissatisfaction with the way which the governments have sought to tackle the coronavirus threat.

Indeed, the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the critical importance of effective government communications around the world, not least in interpreting and understanding and communicating scientific information and government policy. What the pandemic has done is to highlight the importance of critical issues around decision making, regulation and the management of scientific and statistical information and its gathering and interpretation. Political decision making does not generally thrive in the face of uncertainty, especially when confronted with the type of critical dilemmas of balancing health and economic priorities as with the current pandemic. Viruses can grow and change rapidly and be spread by differing groups at different rates depending upon age, culture, environment, fitness, gender, transport networks and misinformation. We have seen all these seven apocalypse riders of the pandemic be blamed for its spread and of course it always impacts more severely on the poorest sections of society. As in many areas of life, a historical perspective can provide some valuable insights.

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We know historically that the Black Death in 14th Century Europe resulted in almost half of the population dying and that its impact resulted in a chronic shortage of labour and greater regulation of the population to guarantee human resources for government. It led to growing factional conflict for resources and gave birth to the mediaval technology revolution which stimulated the development of the increased mechanisation of textile manufacture, fire arms ordinance production, optics and the beginnings of the printing industry. The Black Death pandemic, then like now with advances in digital communication, healthcare and retailing led to technological change and development.

Perhaps the most portentous lessons can be drawn from the devastating impact of the 20th Century “Spanish” Flu, which was named such because Spain reported the virus openly and made basic data available. Many other countries were still under state data control and thus did not report it or were in paralysis as a result of the impact of war and did not record and publish data or reportage on it. So the control, manipulation and misinterpretation of virus data and fake news associated with it have many historic parallels and precedents. We have seen this same phenomena and process repeated and occur globally in this pandemic, the exception being a few ultra-transparent states such as New Zealand. Global institutions such as the United Nations and World Health Organisation have been criticised by some national leaderships to deflect blame from their own domestic short comings and this has undermined international responses to the virus
and led to the creation of disinformation and campaigns against health and care policies.

The core lessons that seem to emerge from history are—deal with it early, disinfect everything, know where your companions have been, restrict socialising and plan for managing its reoccurrence.

One evident challenge that has emerged from the current pandemic is the difficulty of controlling the population in non-collectivist cultures without the aid of quality systems and data. This has challenged many societies and states and resulted in much short-term policy making. This in a long-term pandemic confuses and leads frequently to a decline in the morale of its citizens, lowering of trust in government and declining mental health. Consistent messaging is important and moving from short-term crisis management to long-term planning and communication is critical. This needs to be focused both on the economy and health care.

The implementation and management of scientific advice by government has challenged elected and non-elected governments as their ability to make firm judgements based on facts can often prove problematic and cause divisions amongst government ranks and their supporters. Moreover, keeping abreast of what might be a rapidly changing situation with a pandemic such as coronavirus can be extremely difficult, as the evolving virus multiplies and pupates and impacts on different parts of society at different speeds. How centralised can the response to the disease be, when local variations, capabilities and needs can be significantly different and at variance? A combination of making the response local but coordinated centrally seems to be the most successful practice as we assess track and trace systems and their capability to pinpoint accurately those who are spreading the disease or most at risk. Was Donald Trump a super spreader of Covid? Or was it the journalists covering the campaign or supporters gathering to watch that maximised the dissemination and toxicity of the disease? Without adequate advanced track and trace systems we will never know.

The rise of Digital Health Care and artificial intelligence (AI) associated systems has emerged out of this pandemic as big gainers of how we manage and improve health care and citizens sustainability. The accountability of data and decision making seems to have been eroded, with many organisations and governments seeming to move to an elite form of management decision making which only a few are privy to. Autocracy and power control models which do not adequately account to citizens, governance systems, representatives or tax payers do seem to be increasingly common and on the rise. Over reliance on direct diktat via virtual communication has led to some evidence of what might be seen as George Orwell style “1984” and “Animal Farm” characteristics becoming increasingly adopted and apparent in public sector institutions. These serve to alienate rather than unite the people, who need real and human leadership which looks after, cares and accounts to all. Pandemics have historically been used as an excuse and reason to reduce accountability, freedoms and erode good governance and organisational freedoms and centralise control to an elite decision-making group. We need to be mindful and watchful of that.

Resilience to sustain an onslaught such as a pandemic of this proportion and building this into modelling and planning of the appropriate government, local government and healthcare institutions seems to be essential. And all future risk management systems need to factor this into their organisational and thought processes of their organisations to be genuinely sustainable and resilient. Given the experience of the failings of the way the current coronavirus pandemic has been handled, particularly in term of stakeholder communications, it seems clear that a much stronger focus will need to be placed on how science policy is managed and significantly how such policies are communicated to all relevant stakeholders to help ensure an understanding of both the engineering and virology of society. This focus is likely to become an increasingly important area of responsibility for public affairs.

This issue of the Journal has a particular focus on Covid and how countries and societies are grappling with it and the impact it is having on society. Themes look at migrant workers, retail leisure, hospitality, service sector delivery, societal pressures, domestic abuse and the economic impact of the disease on a cross section of society. We also look at policy making and the Coronavirus and its impact on the wider economy and healthcare. We foresee a number of future journal issues carrying research on Covid to benefit the public affairs researcher and practitioner.

In addition we include in this issue a number of articles on the communication of science and strategic decision making which we hope will aid the profession and some timely book reviews on core texts of interest to readers.

We thank you all for your support and care in 2020 and wish you an excellent 2021.

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