

Pathways of Communication during Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Crisis brings danger and opportunity. The COVID-19 pandemic will go down in history as an unprecedented crisis in the modern world, causing disruption and high death rates in nearly every country. The long-term impact of the pandemic is yet to be assessed. There are fears of a second wave and of deepening economic recession. Social inequality has increased, but there are also local and national initiatives providing help to those most in need. Scientists are responding to the desperate calls for effective vaccines and medications. Many research studies are underway and the knowledge that is gathered is shared and expanded internationally. As the lockdown is lifted and restrictions eased, we face the challenge of deciding whether to build on what we have learnt, or revert to our old ways.

Keywords: COVID-19; Pandemic; Crisis; Outbreak; Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world, a tsunami of shock waves followed in its wake. The virus is continuing to spread at an alarming rate in some countries. National measures to contain infections imposed drastic life changes on whole populations, with varying effects. Members of some ethnic groups, particularly people of black and Asian ethnicity, were found to be more vulnerable to the virus than others, for reasons that are not yet fully understood. The lockdown restrictions exposed and reinforced existing inequalities. In India, 80 million migrant workers lost employment in cities, leaving them hungry and homeless and their families lacking the crucial remittances they depended on. To our own shame, child poverty in the UK resulted in 2,500 children being admitted to hospital with malnutrition in the first six months of 2020, double the number for the previous year. The number of people in the world facing acute hunger could double this year to a quarter of a billion, unless there is urgent humanitarian support.

Lockdown restrictions have impacted much more severely on those who were already disadvantaged. The gulf has widened between those able to work from home and enjoy their leisure and gardens, and those who have lost their jobs, trapped with

children in overcrowded accommodation and facing long-term unemployment. Nine out of ten children across the world have lost part of their education. Many children in poorer countries, especially girls, may never return to school.

Mental health and family relationship

A study carried out by University College London (UCL), Imperial College and the University of Sussex found that almost half of 16 to 24 year olds without previous mental health problems reported high levels of depressive symptoms, with one in three saying they had experienced moderate to severe levels of anxiety during the lockdown [1]. Almost half of the 1,507 young people in the survey said they used over-eating to cope with their moods. Six in ten young people with pre-existing mental health issues reported higher levels of stress and over-eating. Mental health services were disrupted just when they were most needed. Young people moving towards independence were catapulted back into living at home with their parents, uncertain about their chances of higher education, training and work opportunities. Lee Hudson, associate professor at UCL and director of child mental health at Great Ormond Street Hospital, has expressed great concern that the pandemic is a double whammy for young people whose lives were disrupted during a critical transition and who now face a greater risk of unemployment as the country slides into economic recession.

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Childline reported in March 2020 that 67 young people a day were calling for help with suicidal thoughts. Calls from children under 11 have increased 87% in three years.

Isolated elderly individuals have suffered from the lack of social contact and support, while relationships between many couples unable to find respite from each other have been strained to breaking point. Reports of domestic abuse have rocketed. The UN has described the increase in domestic abuse as a 'shadow pandemic' alongside COVID-19. It is thought that cases have increased 20%, with many people trapped at home with their abuser. In England and Wales, long-awaited legislation on domestic abuse has finally been passed. The Domestic Abuse Act 2020 aims to raise awareness and understanding of domestic abuse, strengthen support services and improve the effectiveness of the justice system in dealing with these cases. But early intervention is critical and there is still a shortage of refuges and secure accommodation for those needing to escape from their abuser. One of the changes in the new law is that the abuser can be ordered to leave the home, whereas previously it was the recipient of abuse, generally the woman, who had to leave.

Crisis brings danger and opportunity

The Chinese ideogram for 'crisis' is composed of two characters, one meaning 'danger' and the other, 'opportunity' [2]. In the 14th century, the plague known as the Black Death killed around one third of the population of Europe. Yet despite the terror it caused, the plague turned out to be a catalyst for social and economic change. Alongside the suffering and hardship caused by COVID-19, the lockdown in 2020 is likewise producing some positive changes and benefits. With schools closed, parents have been looking after their children and educating them at home. Research carried out by the Universities of Essex and Southampton for the Understanding COVID-19 survey [3] found that mothers were undertaking a disproportionate amount of childcare and home schooling, on average nine more hours per week than fathers. Nearly one third of mothers reported that spending more time with their children had brought them closer together and strengthened their relationships, compared with only 6% of parents who felt their relationships with their children had deteriorated. Closer relationships were reported not only by parents with higher income levels but also by nearly one third of parents living in deprived circumstances.

Another survey of 1,920 adults carried out for the Office of National Statistics found that 47% of those aged between 16 and 69 said they had found the lockdown a positive experience. They reported exercising more (95%), spending more time on hobbies and interests and less time on commuting. 86% had valued spending more time with the people they lived with and said they wanted to continue their lifestyle changes when the lockdown was lifted. With more time to look and listen, people have enjoyed local walks in a new way, observing wild flowers and listening to birdsong.

The arts have been very badly hit by the lockdown, with theatres and art galleries closed and concerts cancelled. Actors and musicians are struggling to keep going. But their creativity in reaching out online has been inspirational, bringing hours of

enjoyment to those trapped at home. Initiatives including the StayAtHome choir, I Fagiolini's SingTheScore and online theatre productions have been more than compensations: they have created enriching and life-enhancing connections, with music and drama streamed into otherwise parched homes.

Preferential pathways

Raindrops falling on limestone navigate around obstacles, finding hairline cracks and gradually eroding channels through which water can flow more freely. Geologists call these water courses 'preferential pathways'. People use 'preferential pathways' too. There are many ancient trails that people have trodden for centuries on foot, ridden on horseback or navigated by boat. Pilgrims and warriors, nomads and merchants travelled on a vast network of routes across Asia and Europe to visit sacred shrines, wage war or buy and sell produce. In the 19th century a German geologist, Ferdinand von Richthofen (uncle of the 'Red Baron' who flew in the 1st World War), named this web of routes the 'Seidenstrasse', or Silk Roads. In his book of the same name, Peter Frankopan observed that 'these pathways served as the world's central nervous system, connecting people and places together' [4]. Silk was a sought-after luxury product that traders used as international currency, in place of coinage.

Ancient pathways became imbued with spiritual meaning. In Australia, the Aborigines evolved Song Lines of footfall, memory and vision. In the epoch known as the Dreamtime, the first ancestors of aboriginal people emerged to find the earth flat and featureless. 'As they walked, they broke through the crust of the earth and awoke the sleeping life beneath it, so that the landscape sprang into being with each pace' [5]. The verb, 'to saunter', is derived from the French 'sans terre', a contraction of 'à la sainte terre', meaning 'to the sacred place', a pilgrimage. Could 'sentier', a path in French, come from the same root as 'sentir', to feel? Robert Macfarlane suggests that sentiment is embedded in sediment. Pathways connect people, time and place: they also link memory with discovery and ideas. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote in his Confessions that he could only think while walking, 'my mind only works with my legs' [6].

Pathways and connections provide opportunities for knowledge and ideas to be exchanged, adapted and refined.

Pathways of communication

Paths need to be walked. Otherwise, they become overgrown. Pathways of human communication need to be kept open too. Paradoxically, the enforcement of physical distancing has resulted in many people connecting with each other more than they did previously but not by writing letters. A trove of old family papers may contain letters from grandparents or great-grandparents or holiday postcards from children. Some of these make us laugh, while others evoke the pain and fears of living through the 1st or 2nd World Wars. Our great-grandchildren will find few letters describing life during the COVID-19 pandemic. The demise of letter-writing represents a considerable loss for social historians, as well as for future generations. A handwritten letter conveys far more than a text or email and may be kept for far longer.

Mix lynx and bee-lines

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the development of the steam engine, internal combustion and jet engines enabled ever speedier travel, until it became normal to go abroad on holiday, or fly from London to New York for a business meeting. Since the 1940s, modern agriculture and out-of-town developments in the UK have swept away 97% of wildflower-rich land – 7 million hectares. It is predicted that 40 – 70% of insect species could become extinct if confined to small fragments of land. To help stave off this catastrophic decline, conservationists have launched a project to restore and create 150,000 hectares of wildflower pathways which they call 'B-Lines'. B-Lines are a strategically mapped network of existing and potential wildflower habitats that criss-cross the country from coast to coast and across towns and cities, linking fragmented sites. These corridors help insect species to survive. Just south of Bristol, an increasingly rare species, the black carrot-mining bee, has been recorded on the West of England B-Line, on the fringe of the city where it had not been seen since 2013. It is hoped that the six-banded nomad bee will be found on the Devon B-Line. Farmers and landowners are being urged to restore and create hedgerows and habitats for birds, butterflies and other insects. At Knepp Castle estate in Sussex, wild cranes are nesting and raising young [7]. It is the first time that cranes have been seen in this country for 400 years. Benedict Macdonald, author of *Rebirding*, a manifesto for rewilding, has pointed out that *'the great myth surrounding animals like beavers, boar and lynx is that they cause disruption and imbalance. In fact, the opposite is true: these are nature's original conservationists.'*

Creating new pathways

During the lockdown and even since its easing, travel, especially by public transport, has declined dramatically. While confined at home, many people have developed their digital skills in order to draw from the huge resources of the internet and connect in other ways. Personal news and digital photos can be shared instantaneously on social media. Families and friends can meet together virtually using Zoom, FaceTime etc. Connections on social media are instant and cheap and texting is increasingly preferred to emailing. A survey of 1,500 people carried out by Bright Horizons, the nursery provider, found that almost half – 48% - of working parents who worked in an office before lockdown were considering asking their employers for more flexible combinations of office and remote working. There are indications that working from home increases productivity, rather than reducing it.

Those in need of help are increasingly looking for help online and becoming more adept in locating the kind of service they need. Instead of sending a standardized reply, service providers need to tailor their response to meet the particular need, selecting swiftly and skilfully from the different forms of communication available. Many family mediators trained in facilitating face-to-face meetings have switched to working online. Instead of experiencing constraints in virtual meetings, mediators are finding that couples and family members whose communication has become severely dysfunctional, or which has broken down altogether, participate more willingly in online

meetings. Seeing each other online is a great deal less stressful than meeting face to face in a small room in an overheated atmosphere. There are no interruptions in online meetings, because only one person can speak at a time and the pace of discussions can be managed more easily. Many mediators say they expect to work more online from now on.

Children and young people should be offered options too and their preferences may vary according to their age. Younger children may prefer an actual meeting, with a drink and snacks offered, if parents allow, and things to draw or fiddle with while they talk. Teenagers, on the other hand, may feel more at ease talking on the phone in the privacy of their bedroom, without either of their parents around. This saves the young person the discomfort of being chauffeured to and from a meeting by one of their parents, afraid of being asked probing questions or sitting in uncomfortable silence. Young people may be more relaxed talking on the phone or in a zoom meeting than face to face in a small room. A surprising number say they enjoy reading and welcome recommendations such as Kathryn Lamb's *HELP! My Family is Driving Me Crazy ! - A Survival Guide for Teenagers* [8].

However, there are also difficulties and disadvantages in meeting online. Background noise may be disturbing and should be eliminated, if possible. Body language cannot be observed to the same extent. Online meetings require careful preparation and safeguards. The website <https://webconferencing-test.com> sets out the pros and cons of various online meeting services. Zoom offers a whiteboard service which allows the host of the meeting to record notes or figures for all participants to view. It is also possible to use breakout rooms. Another consideration is the technology available. Some people do not have access to a computer, laptop or tablet, but may have a phone with a camera. In an online meeting, it is important for all participants to be visible on the screen at the same time and to take steps to make sure that nobody else is listening in or recording them. Where domestic abuse or coercive control is, or may be, an issue, particular care is needed to avoid risks of coaching or threats. Online meetings may not be suitable in such cases. A number of counselling and mediation organizations have produced 'good practice' guides on the ethics and technicalities of online meetings. But where there is friendship, love and trust, virtual meetings remain a poor substitute for meeting face to face. The Guyanian poet, Grace Nichols, who has lived in Britain since 1977, reflects that [9]:

When it's all over and hopefully it will be over,

I'll look back and probably miss

This strange web of our togetherness

Yes, the virtual world can console.

But watch how easily I'll trade it -

For the simple harbour of a hug'.

DISCUSSION

Global pathways

If we build on what we have learnt during lockdown, pathways of communication can be developed further to increase social cohesion and connectedness, promote co-operation within and between communities and foster a greater sense of global unity. During the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd in the USA brought together people from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds, privileged and under-privileged, to campaign under the banner of Black Lives Matter for social equality and justice in place of institutional racism and discrimination. Accepting the truth of exploitation and abuse in the past is not an attack on our history and identity. It opens our eyes to the exploitation and abuse that continue in the present day, such as the inhuman treatment of migrant workers and child refugees. The historian, David Olusoga, has heralded 2020 as a year of impossibilities made possible. It seems barely credible that our grandson, aged 29 this year, has over 100,000 followers on his Instagram platform. He is using his platform to host debates and encourage conversations between members of different ethnic groups and communities on valuing diversity and working together for social reform. Young people need to be actively involved in bringing positive changes to their communities. In some cities, members of the Youth Council, an elected group of young people aged 11 to 18, work alongside the city council providing advice and ideas.

CONCLUSION

The thinking we need is not all new. Socrates questioned the quest for growth and material possessions. Bevis Watts, CEO of

Triodos Bank UK, is opposed to banking systems that underpin racism, inequality and climate change. With Brexit threatening the increasingly dis-United Kingdom with prolonged insecurity, shortages and rising costs, it is more important than ever to listen to each other's needs, respond with empathy and take positive and sustainable action to support each other and protect the natural world.

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