

THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE CORONAVIRUS EPIDEMIC

As of 22 April 2020

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1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, infectious diseases and virus outbreaks have followed man, with pandemics such as the Bubonic Plague, Spanish Flu, and more recently, SARS¹ and H1N1² creating large-scale upheavals across communities (LePan, 2020). As civilization evolved, so has the impacts of such pandemics and our responses to them.

A pandemic possesses the following traits: (1) person-to-person disease movement, (2) transregional, (3) novel, (4) highly infectious, and (5) severe (Morens, Folkers, & Fauci, 2009). Last year, the coronavirus family saw their newest addition (SARS-CoV2), a pandemic that is now rapidly sweeping across the globe (Tesini, 2020). While the true origins of the virus is still under debate, cases were first detected back in December 2019 (Secon, Woodward, & Mosher, 2020). Initial reports linked the coronavirus origins to a wet market in the Chinese city of Wuhan (Maron, 2020). However, recent speculations suggest that the virus actually emanated from a virology laboratory nearby, due to lapses in safe laboratory practices (Rapoza, 2020). Chinese authorities have not only refuted these claims, but also implied that the virus actually originated from the US (DiResta, 2020). Weibel (2020) noted that past epidemics have highlighted the social consequences of how people talk about a disease's origins, in line with Fukuda (2013)'s concerns regarding fairness and stigmatization should the virus be associated with a certain community. The World Health Organization (WHO) has attempted to mitigate this issue by discouraging the use of the term "Wuhan virus" or "Chinese virus", and officially naming it "**COVID-19**" (World Health Organization, 2020). Even so, the attribution of the virus origins has become an issue embroiled in a geopolitical ploy between two of the world's major powers -- the US and China -- resulting in much political strife and influencing regional and international policies.

When juxtaposed with previous pandemics (most closely, the SARS outbreak), new technologies that have since emerged presents new dimensions to consider when analysing the impacts of COVID-19. In the context of today's globalized world, widespread air and sea travel serves as one of the main drivers for the spread of COVID-19 globally.

¹ Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (2003)

² Swine Flu pandemic (2009-2010)

Broadly, COVID-19 has upended daily life as most people (in affected areas) know it, and brought along a host of political, economic and various other social impacts.

2. POLITICAL IMPACTS

2.1 Geopolitical Impacts

COVID-19 has altered bilateral, regional and international relations. US-China relations, mired in existing (political and economic) tensions prior to the onset of the pandemic, have further deteriorated under the ongoing blame game surrounding COVID-19 origins (Widakuswara, 2020). Regional organizations such as the European Union (EU)'s foundation is slowly crumbling, following the lack of solidarity between EU leaders in negotiating a euro rescue package, leading to a rise in Euroscepticism³ (Bet, 2020). According to a survey carried out by Termometro, 39.9 percent of Italians voted to leave the EU, prompting the possibility of a "Brexit" re-enactment – the "Italexit" (Express, 2020). On the international arena, US response to COVID-19 leaves much to be desired, with President Trump coming under fire for failing to fulfil his role as a world leader and taking decisive charge of the crisis response. In an interview with CNN, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has expressed the need for more American leadership in this virus-stricken climate, or risk countries turning elsewhere (Jaipragas, 2020). As the coronavirus catalyses the unfolding of such events, the international political climate will see lasting changes even post COVID-19.

2.2 Domestic Impacts

COVID-19 has also sparked dissent against domestic governments for inadequate measures taken to fight the virus, resulting in deteriorating faith in governments across several countries. Domestic political structures, now tied to differences in crisis response, has come under public scrutiny. As elections slated worldwide roll around the corner, political leaders are also placed under greater pressure to adapt to current circumstances and have to decide how best to manoeuvre the situation and leverage it to their advantage.

³ Opposition/doubt in benefits of European integration (largely pertaining to the EU) (Ultan & Ornek, 2015)

2.2.1 Political impact in China

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) heavily cracked down on early reports of the coronavirus by dismissing them as rumours and fear-mongering (Hernández, 2020). Dr Li Wenliang, one of the prime whistle-blowers, was made to sign a letter stating that he had made “false comments” and had “severely disturbed the social order” by the Public Security Bureau (Grundy, 2020). Li later succumbed to the virus himself, amidst an explosion of infection cases and the rapidly spiralling situation in China. Nobel Laureate Mario Vargas Llosa has attributed the severe outcome to China’s dictatorship model, which hindered critical early-stage crisis response (The Straits Times, 2020). This episode rattled many Chinese people’s trust in the CCP, revealing a “crisis of governance”, as all the initial cover ups, lack of free press and speech had prevented the outbreak from being tackled sooner, causing the situation to worsen exponentially.

2.2.2 Political impact in the US

Despite China serving as an alarming precedent, the West was slow to react. Even as advisors warned about the potential impacts of the pandemic, Trump’s initial response was to downplay the situation (Lipton, et al., 2020). The slow response and inadequate containment measures likely contributed to US’s currently leading infection numbers at over 800,000 cases (Worldometer, n.d.). While US officials have since changed their message, urging citizens to take the pandemic seriously, US pandemic response remains “fragmented, chaotic, and plagued by contradictory messaging from political leaders” (Science News, 2020). The president is now facing mounting public criticism, with recent polls showing that more Americans disapprove of Trump’s handling of the virus than approve (Shear & Jr., 2020).

2.2.3 Impact on elections (Singapore)

The current situation has complicated matters for upcoming elections. In Singapore, the general elections is currently still set to take place sometime this year, despite protests by opposition parties. The situation may prove advantageous for the ruling party (the People’s Action Party) to be re-elected, as people are likely to vote for a safe and proven government in a climate of uncertainty (Sim, 2020). Since the opposition parties in Singapore heavily depend upon political rallies and door-to-door visits for public outreach, the cancellation of such events would further disadvantage them (Salim, 2020). The COVID-19 situation thus

carries the grave possibility of influencing election outcomes for not just Singapore, but other countries as well.

3. ECONOMIC IMPACTS

The global economy has thus far hinged upon the concept of globalization – that is, an interconnected economy with free flow of people, goods and services between countries. Amidst Brexit, the US-China trade war and US-Mexico tensions, the world has seen an upsurge in nationalistic sentiments and pushback against open borders and global interconnectivity (Goodman, 2020). In this context, the outbreak of COVID-19 may well escalate the trend of isolationism, as countries rapidly enact social distancing measures and shut borders to fight against the pandemic. Not only have global supply chains and manufacturing processes been disrupted, COVID-19 has also impeded international trade and tourism, plunging entire countries into recession and widespread unemployment. The economic fallout from the coronavirus may be the gravest in years, surpassing even that of the 2008 financial crisis (Roubini, 2020).

3.1 Global recession, trade and unemployment

Multiple economies have faced severe contractions, namely the US, China, Eurozone, and essentially much of the world. France estimates a contraction of around six percent in the first quarter of 2020, marking its worst quarterly performance since World War 2 (Channel News Asia, 2020). Global trade has also plummeted, with the World Trade Organization projecting world trade to dip by 13% to 32% due to the disruptions brought by COVID-19 (World Trade Organization, 2020). This has led to inevitable recession for multiple countries, and unemployment rates have since shot up. In the face of lockdowns and bans on non-essential travel, tourism and related sectors are particularly affected. According to US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, unemployment rate may climb above 20% if the US fails to stimulate the economy (Reuters, 2020).

3.2 Future trends: Shift from China as manufacturing hub

COVID-19 may even permanently change China's status as the world's manufacturing hub. Many countries, heavily dependent upon supply chains based in China, were shaken by the hit to international trade lines during this pandemic. The pandemic has illustrated the dangers of overreliance on a single market, after desperate demand from countries for

much needed personal protective equipment (PPE)⁴ from China were unmet. The US which has already made plans to “disentangle critical technologies and reduce strategic dependencies on China”, will likely accelerate the process (Cronin, Doran, & Rough, 2020). After this shock, other countries are likely to follow suit and look for alternatives to Chinese manufacturing to diversify any future risks. Hence, as the world looks to reduce dependency upon China, this pandemic may gravely shake China’s economic status in the world.

4. OTHER SOCIAL IMPACTS

Political and economic changes brought about by the pandemic has contributed to a host of other social consequences, some of which include: the mass displacement of people, impact to mental health and personal safety, an increase in crime rates and increase in state surveillance. Apart from threatening physical health, the virus has brought about widespread irrational fear and panic across societies, hence manifesting itself as a dire psychological threat too.

4.1 Displacement of People

The coronavirus outbreak unfortunately coincided with the period of Chinese New Year celebrations –the largest festive period for the Chinese as well as the “largest annual human migration in the world” (Hodge, 2020). During Chinese New Year, Chinese within the mainland and all around the world usually travel back to their hometowns for customary reunion gatherings with their family and friends. As new social restrictions and city-wide lockdowns abruptly kick in place, many travellers were suddenly segregated or quarantined from their family. The sheer number of displaced people stuck in transit or visitations resulted in “coronavirus refugees” – people who suddenly find themselves having to wander the streets after being barred in transit between cities (Li, 2020). Many domestic migrant workers from rural areas were turned away from their places of residences in the cities, yet unable to return to their hometowns due to the lockdown policies (Li, 2020).

⁴ Front line medical workers across the world are facing a dire shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), including: masks, surgical gowns and eye gear to protect them against the virus (Jacobs, Richtel, & Baker, 2020). Currently, China supplies 48 percent of personal protective equipment imported to the United States and 50 percent to the European Union (The Straits Times, 2020).

A similar situation unfolded in India, where a sudden lockdown has left millions of migrant workers stranded hundreds of miles from their home cities. Many were left without food or shelter, and found little choice but to continue their journey home on foot, dying from hunger, exhaustion or accidents along the way (VICE News, 2020). Those who made it back to their villages found themselves no longer welcome, with barricades being set up at entry points to warn the returning migrants against entering the villages before a health check (The Guardian, 2020). On top of official mortality rates directly attributed to the virus, there are unfortunately also countless victims affected as a by-product of the consequences of the coronavirus, whose deaths may be lying unaccounted for.

4.2 Threat to Mental Health and Safety

Mental health providers have reported an uptick in calls from people seeking mental health treatment ever since the outbreak of the pandemic. In a poll by the American Psychiatric Association, 36% of Americans stated that the pandemic had a serious impact on their mental health. According to Rhiana Holmes, a trauma therapist specializing in disaster psychology, depression and anxiety “thrive on social isolation and disruption of routine” (Forbes, 2020). The ongoing pandemic and accompanying quarantine measures thus makes the situation a prime one for mental health upheavals.

With lockdowns in place, concerns about domestic violence are also on the rise, as victims fear for their personal safety while being stuck in an enclosed space with potential abusers. According to reports lodged at the National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH), COVID-19 has affected accessibility to support and services like shelter and counselling. Abusive partners are also using stay-home policies as an excuse to perpetuate their control over the victim by forbidding them to leave the house and keeping them in close proximity to abuse. To exacerbate the situation, financial stress due to the faltering economy and spike in unemployment may also be responsible for the soaring incidences of domestic violence as tempers fray more easily (The Guardian, 2020). Since women hold two-thirds of America’s low-wage jobs, many of which were lost due to the unsteady economic climate, financial uncertainty further acts as a barrier stopping women from leaving (National Women's Law Center, n.d.).

4.3 Increased Crime Rates

COVID-19 has spurred a host of coronavirus-related crimes as societies slowly fall into panic and disorder. The pandemic has transformed otherwise common products such as household items into highly sought after commodities, with people willing to go to great lengths to land their hands upon them. In Hong Kong, armed robbers threatened a supermarket deliveryman and made off with hundreds of toilet rolls from a supermarket (TODAY, 2020). Meanwhile in Japan, a hospital reported some 6,000 surgical masks stolen from a locked storage facility (TODAY, 2020). These crimes that are occurring worldwide have unsettled citizens, who anticipate civil disorder in such an uncertain climate. In the US, the sale of firearms has shot up considerably amidst coronavirus fears (Collins & Yaffe-Bellany, 2020). While the virus does not manifest itself as a physical danger that we can fight against, the psychological threat it poses is immense. People are arming themselves – not just against the virus itself – but also against (the actions of) other people amidst this pandemic. As with all crises, this pandemic threatens to strip away the thin veneer of “civilization” our societies hide behind.

On top of normal crime, there is also an uptick in hate crime – crimes targeting a specific group of people. Despite WHO’s attempts to discourage the association of the virus with any one community, politicization and other factors has rendered those attempts rather ineffective. The media has increasingly reported displays of racism and stigma against the Chinese community overseas and by association, any Asian who resembles being Chinese. Aggression is directed particularly at those wearing facemasks, with incidents becoming so commonplace that it is now dubbed “maskaphobia” (The Guardian, 2020). A Singaporean Chinese student was cornered and assaulted in the streets of London by a group of English teens, and told, “I don't want your coronavirus in my country” (The Straits Times, 2020). In a rather ironic turn of events, many Chinese students even contemplated “fleeing” back to China despite the virus still ravaging the Chinese cities at the time, which they consider safer than staying in Britain and facing increasingly racist attacks and derision. Furthermore, with increased internet usage due to stay-at-home measures, racists are pouncing on this opportunity to spread their prejudices and fuel similar sentiments on online platforms such as 4chan (The Quartz, 2020). Should this persist, a divide may start growing between Asian and Western communities, with a very real possibility of this racial tension outlasting the period of this pandemic and leaving behind lasting hurt.

When juxtaposed with previous pandemics, the unprecedented accessibility to the internet in this digital age has allowed technology to be the main driver for coronavirus-related cybercrime. These cybercrime are mostly mercenary in nature, with people capitalizing on the situation to pose as legitimate government bodies and organizations to phish for personal information and set up elaborate scams. The Federal Trade Commission has reported a whopping 7,800 consumer complaints in the US alone relating to coronavirus scams, with the average loss being \$600 per victim (The Washington Post, 2020). The way COVID-19 has affected so many different aspects of an individual's life –physically, mentally, financially, and across geographies for a drawn out period, only serves to broaden the scope and ways in which cybercriminals can act and attack.

4.4 Increased State Surveillance

States have expanded the use of surveillance technologies for contact tracing and “public health” purposes, prompting fears that biometric surveillance may be the new norm even after the pandemic (Kharpal, Use of surveillance to fight coronavirus raises concerns about government power after pandemic ends, 2020). China has ramped up its mass surveillance capabilities, from deploying drones to engaging facial recognition technologies to track people and ensure they abide by quarantine orders (Kharpal, 2020). Other countries such as Israel, Singapore and South Korea have also utilized surveillance data in containment efforts (Kharpal, 2020). This raises concerns over potential abuse of power by the state, especially for the CCP - well known for their undemocratic ways of tracking and quashing dissent by the people. Considering that increased state surveillance may be here to stay even after the pandemic, it will strike further imbalance in the degree of power state authorities hold over citizens, unleashing fear and paranoia over what this signifies for the future.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the usual functioning of society on an extremely large scale. While the pandemic may blow over in time, there are certain lasting consequences that will follow. The global political and economic climate is likely to see drastic changes, with a shift in power status for both the US and China. Other resultant social impacts caused by the pandemic, such as the impact to mental health may result in a hidden crisis for authorities to tackle (The Straits Times, 2020). Meanwhile, the role of new technologies has and will continue to play an important role in shaping the aftermath

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of COVID-19. As the situation is still unfolding, most of the consequences examined here are immediate in nature; as for the possible consequences yet to be explored, one can only speculate for now.

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