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Global Health Security

COVID-19: What Changes – and What Doesn't

By the CENS/FIT Team

SYNOPSIS

The roles of the individual and the government have been dramatically affected by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. There will be a profound effect on governance at all levels going forward. Existing domestic policies and prevailing bases of international cooperation cannot remain as in the status quo ante.

COMMENTARY

The COVID-19 crisis blurs the boundaries between private and public life. Measures to curb the spread of the virus often infringe upon personal choice and privacy.

COVID-19 makes salient how decisions made by any one individual — whether relating to movement, personal hygiene, consumer behaviour — can have profound impact on others. The convergence of the private and public can be seen in [government](#) and [media](#) exposé on socially irresponsible behaviour. This is accompanied by [individuals turning to social media](#) to post about and berate socially irresponsible behaviour, such as using an [app](#) to report those flouting the rules.

Societies and Resilience

The rise in vigilante behaviour creates a social landscape that is increasingly panoptic: trust in government in Singapore remains high and has eased the passage and acceptance of tough measures, but whether there have concomitantly been receding levels of trust between members of the community is an issue that urgently needs study.

What Singapore and other countries cannot afford is greater fractiousness in times where solidarity is of paramount importance. There is a need, therefore, to understand how to cultivate trust amidst heightened surveillance.

A related issue is what sort of redundancies states like Singapore must build as they prepare for the next pandemic. The most evident is the need to continually upgrade and maintain healthcare capacity. However, there is an equally pressing issue of nurturing a reservoir of prosocial behaviour in citizens — behaviours that can be initiated and sustained by the community in times of crisis. Warnings by health officials suggest that important parts of this puzzle [still need to be worked on](#).

COVID-19 and the responses to it have thrown into sharp relief the foundations of social resilience – the symbiotic relationship between individual resilience and the resilience of the wider community. As events during Singapore’s “[circuit breaker](#)” period show, the action of the one can have a cascading effect on the many as a community is only as resilient as its weakest link.

Fissures and Impact

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has observed that the pandemic is [not an indictment of globalisation](#). But debates will rage, long after COVID-19 is overcome, concerning the relationship between exclusive nationalism and international cooperation. COVID-19 has led nationalism to take on ever more [exclusivist forms](#). At the same time, there is a renewed awareness of how interconnected and interdependent we are as a global community.

The idea that we are all members of a wider community and have responsibilities to each other as human beings appears to have a rallying effect on [local](#), [regional](#) and [global](#) scales, such as [international aid packages](#) for COVID-19 relief.

The tension between these forces will inevitably affect Singapore, be it be in terms of how the international supply chain is re-ordered, or, more significantly, how countries turn inwards and eschew cooperation in times of crisis.

Extremism and Conspiracy Theories

The pandemic has energised voices from the extreme fringes. Border closures and other control measures to prevent the pandemic have reinvigorated nativist discourses. [Apocalyptic ideas](#), specifically of the COVID-19 virus decimating the ‘other’ are emerging from jihadi networks, but also among elements of the far-right, which are trying to position themselves as purveyors of [accelerated change](#) in an uncertain world.

While white supremacists are exploiting the virus to build on rapid momentum gained since the New Zealand Christchurch mosque attacks, Salafi Jihadists are trying to claw back relevance through self-righteous rhetoric. ISIS views the pandemic as God’s [punishment](#) for the immoral lifestyles and oppressive actions of apostate nations, whose weakened state now offers scope for jihadis to rise up and fight.

Terrorist attacks are unpredictable, but a greater threat may lie in the divisive power of extremist hyperbole. The belief that major political events are generated by secret plans between interested parties, distorts public perception on the real harm posed by COVID-19 and could diminish cooperation with legitimate efforts to tackle the pandemic.

Beyond organised networks, individuals who wield conspiracy theories to justify violence and other destructive anti-social behaviour have hitched on to the COVID-19 news cycle, targeting [medical facilities](#) and personnel.

Uncertainty surrounding the pandemic has revealed the spectrum of self-organising activities that can fill real and perceived governance vacuums. In Brazil, [curfews are imposed](#) in Rio de Janeiro shanty towns by gangs. In South Africa's [Cape Town](#), rival gangs have come together using their networks to distribute food to impoverished communities.

In Indonesia, the hard-line Islamist organisation Front Pembela Islam (FPI) is stoking subversive discontent among its several million supporters, calling on people to seize control of their own communities. In India, sectarian tensions have heightened as communal media outlets resorted to the Hindu-Muslim divide to hype up threats posed by COVID-19.

Info-Communication Technology and Cybersecurity

COVID-19 has led to a reliance on communication technology on an unprecedented scale. Communication technology facilitates the ability to [work from home](#), have [home-based learning](#), and [maintain social bonds](#).

As long as Singapore's use of technology yields positive results in the crisis, whether it be the use of Trace Together for contact tracing, education technology for home based learning, video calls for 'work from home', or F&B operators using e-commerce apps to [keep their businesses alive](#), this will drive the population to accelerate adoption of the Smart Nation initiative.

At the same time, Singaporeans will demand better cybersecurity and resilience in the technology they use, and providers who can build that trust will succeed.

The proliferation of hoaxes on social media has been exacerbated during this time by an increased dependence on info-communication technology for information, sense-making, and even human connection, as whole countries go into lockdown and people are physically isolated from one another.

Social media and messaging platforms have twin effects. They help societies stay resilient such as by [helping](#) small local businesses reach customers despite social distancing and shutdowns. They also enable the dissemination of hate speech, conspiracies, and dangerous medical misinformation that undermine societies from within. For example, xenophobic content has [spread fear](#) of people of Chinese heritage as well as the businesses that they operate. Measures taken by social media companies, such as limiting the forwarding of messages, will [impede](#) some but not all

of the spread of misinformation, and governments will also continue to [demand they take further action](#) because of the danger to societal well-being.

Technology and Trust

The increased dependence on technology also exposes more people and their organisations to cyberattacks and cybercrime. [Healthcare computer systems](#) around the world continue to be hacked and this could be fatal for infected patients.

If states finally take the cybersecurity of domestic critical information infrastructure (CII, like healthcare computer systems) more seriously now, and hold each other to norms of behaviour (agreed at the [UN Group of Governmental Experts' meeting in 2015](#)), such as recognising the inviolability of a state's critical infrastructure, then some good might come of the crisis. However, the UN processes guiding responsible state action in cyberspace have also been [slowed down by the current crisis](#).

The domestic norms of technology use relating to surveillance and privacy are also shifting as governments worldwide use technology to trace contacts and enforce anti-COVID-19 measures. As more countries use [mobile phone metadata](#) and [applications](#), [aerial drones](#), and [robots](#) to enforce quarantines, disperse gatherings, and distribute aid, more authoritarian governments (and their citizens), and even perhaps relatively liberal systems forced by present circumstances to adopt authoritarian measures will [become accustomed](#) to this level of control.

Way Forward: What Sort of Future Society?

Narratives matter. Good strategic communication and crisis communication has become more vital than ever. The difference between [good communication](#) (clear measures for reducing risk, backed by scientific expertise) and bad communication (lack of transparency, failure to build trust or buy in for emergency measures) [can be fatal in pandemics](#).

A shared narrative helps citizens to understand emergency measures and, most importantly, coordinate and unite individual efforts towards the common goal of weathering a national crisis together. Those in charge must come out of COVID-19 with lessons learned of how to communicate better in crises.

A key question people will ask during the ongoing crisis – and one that will be more pressing as it abates – is whether, when, and how things will return to the way they were. Governments should not shirk the question, but for those governments which have thought deeply enough, it is also incumbent to go beyond simple responses and to ask the sort of society we want for the future.

The Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) and Future Issues and Technology (FIT) cluster at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore have set up a team of researchers to study the implications of COVID-19 on social resilience and homeland security. They contributed their first report as this commentary. This is part of a series.

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