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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Pandemic Conundrum: To Control or to Trust?

By Yasmine Wong

SYNOPSIS

The COVID-19 pandemic has blurred the boundaries between private and public life. Government efforts to discourage socially irresponsible behaviour have emboldened individuals to report, shame, and berate individuals who flout rules. This rise in mutual surveillance erodes trust in the community, and in social capital.

COMMENTARY

COVID-19 HAS made salient how individual decisions — whether relating to movement, personal hygiene, and consumer behaviour — can profoundly impact others. This interconnectedness renders the private publicly relevant and thus exposes private life to public scrutiny. The effects of this social environment may wear down social trust and social capital within the community.

As individual actions come under scrutiny during COVID-19, mutual surveillance has flourished. At the community level, individuals report on one another to the authorities, at times turning to [social media](#) to berate socially irresponsible behaviour which includes [not wearing a mask in public](#) and [flouting safe distancing rules](#), amongst others. As the world eases into a [new normal](#) and society is faced with the reality that safe distancing measures will persist in some form, the use of mutual surveillance needs to be reconsidered vis-à-vis its effects on social trust.

COVID-19 and the Panopticon

The intensified state of mutual surveillance creates a social environment best described as panoptic. The [Panopticon](#) was conceived by the English reformer Jeremy Bentham as a social control mechanism. It describes a prison designed to make prisoners aware of the possibility of being under constant watch.

With such a prison, prisoners self-police out of fear of consequences. This idea was expanded by the French philosopher Michel Foucault to criticise the modern society disciplined through surveillance. The Panopticon has since been used as a commentary on surveillance and control in everyday life, for example, the new embeddedness of [digital surveillance](#) in society.

The Panopticon aptly describes lived reality during the pandemic, where the encouragement of mutual surveillance cultivates a panoptic social environment. COVID-19 may prompt suspicion and distrust; this forms part of our '[behavioural immune system](#)'. It consists of behavioural and psychological adaptations we undergo to reduce the likelihood of contact with the virus.

However, because of this, life during COVID-19 is one exposed to observation and judgment from others. Individuals become more [conformist and morally vigilant](#) during a pandemic, resulting in paranoia and harsh condemnation of those who do not similarly abide by safe distancing rules.

The Utility and Disutility of the Panopticon

In the era of COVID-19, channelling these insecurities to enforce safe distancing rules appear to be a productive way to capitalise on pandemic anxieties. A seemingly convincing utilitarian argument supports mutual surveillance and the cultivation of the panopticon: we are currently in times of unprecedented crisis, and the urgent need to curb the spread of the virus appears to outweigh concerns of privacy. After all, conformity increases when surveillance increases.

Governments are also seen to capitalise on mutual surveillance to steer the public towards safe distancing practices. In Singapore, the expansion of the government app and portal, [OneServiceApp](#), allows the population to report cases where safe distancing is breached. Some police forces in [England and Wales](#) have also introduced similar reporting platforms.

Unfortunately, the community-level, mutual surveillance can prominently manifest in [pandemic vigilantism](#), which encompasses "[pandemic snitching](#)" and "[pandemic shaming](#)".

In Europe, there were concerns of [neighbours turning on each other](#) at the height of pandemic paranoia. The rise of pandemic snitching in [Germany](#) has sparked uncomfortable comparisons to its Stasi past, and residents in [Toronto](#) and the [UK](#) flooded emergency and police lines with reports of safe distancing breaches.

Here in Singapore, the rise of pandemic vigilantism culminated in the creation of the "SG Covidiot" Facebook page which shows videos of individuals flouting safe distancing measures. It has gained both traction and notoriety, with many concerned

about its [legality](#) and [ethics](#) due to the prevalence of doxxing and shaming on the page.

Trust as a Resource

However, the defence of mutual surveillance as a matter of utility obscures its long-term negative social impacts.

The mutual surveillance that has emerged during the pandemic occurs through the alienation of individuals seen to flout safe distancing rules, potentially [encouraging bullying](#) at the expense of empathy; its risks [fuelling social divisions](#). As surveillance academic Kirstie Ball notes, the conformity that emerges from such surveillance damages the quality of social relations, as it is founded on mutual suspicions and distrust.

[Social trust](#) is the foundation underlying social relationships. In an ideal society, people exercise trust when interacting with others, expecting others to behave and respond in a certain way. Without trust, uncertainties and friction emerging from daily interactions erode the foundation of community and society.

As characterised by political scientist Robert D. Putnam, social trust is indicative of social capital – a resource that facilitates relationships amongst individuals and enables cooperation and collaboration within society. The presence of social capital indicates that there are networks and norms of reciprocity and trust in society, that individuals are cohesive and have meaningful social engagements.

The gravity of declining social capital is especially worrying during a pandemic as [social capital is cardinal to resilience and long-term recovery](#). Social capital, accounting for the bonds which tie communities and citizens together, enables the mobilisation of community efforts and invention of new solutions born of grassroots efforts.

Likening recovery from a crisis to recovery from a disease, American academic Daniel Aldrich states that it has more to do with the quality of the host than the nature of the disease. The relationship between [social capital and recovery](#) partially explains why places like New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina did not witness a vibrant recovery seen in Kobe after the Great Hanshin earthquake in 1995.

The Need to Factor Trust

Despite the utility of crowdsourced surveillance to clamp down on the violation of safe distancing laws, it is also crucial to recognise how a social panopticon may negatively affect trust and social capital. As Foucault argued, the effects of surveillance are permanent, and declining social capital is a cause for concern as it cannot be rebuilt overnight, requiring a longer-term approach.

The recovery from COVID-19 is a lengthy process. As countries adjust to the new normal and establish new norms to navigate a post-COVID-19 reality, it is important to weigh the short-term gain of constructing a panoptic society with the long-term impacts of its blow on social capital. By trying to save many, we may jeopardise all.

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