



Investigating Post-Corona: The Further Weakening of Mutual Understanding and Cooperation

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Key points

- The fear of a weakening shared mentality shakes democracy
- A reconfirmation of the importance of “specific knowledge” in the field
- A search for hints of positive change using the disaster as an opportunity

How will our everyday lives, the economy, and politics change from the COVID-19 pandemic? It is highly uncertain what knowledge is necessary to answer this question. The future is not determined along the lines of either fatalism or historicism. It depends on the paths that each one of us chooses. This is why in addition to preparations that predict change, it is also surely necessary to self-confirm what you want and what you will reexamine.

Opinions of how serious COVID-19 is compared to the seasonal influenza up until now appear to be divided among experts. It appears difficult to confirm and classify the cause of death, but let's take a look at published numbers for reference (see chart). The disparity between the number of current COVID-19-related deaths and seasonal influenza-related deaths from 2017 differs greatly based on the country.

In countries where there are many victims of COVID-19, the number of COVID-19-related deaths reached several times the number of seasonal influenza-related deaths. For example, as of the end of July 2020, the United States had over 150,000 COVID-19-related deaths, but the number of seasonal influenza-related deaths was only about 40,000 in 2017. Brazil, UK, Italy, France, Spain, and Mexico had similar trends.

Meanwhile, in countries with fewer than 10,000 COVID-19-related deaths, there are many cases where this relationship is reversed. In China, Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Japan, and even in South Korea, the number of seasonal influenza-related deaths is much greater. Even when vaccines and drugs for treatment have been developed, many people are still dying.



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It could be said that these numbers show the complexity of the issue from the fact that the relationship between the virus and people, issues being dealt with by each country, and measures taken differ by country and society.



The threat of a pandemic and the chaos caused by fear are separate things. However, the psychological factor of fear has the power to alter everyday life, social structures, and social systems. The many changes that may occur are already being discussed. It is predicted that more people will work from home and that there will be changes in working styles and the shapes of households. It is also predicted that international production systems, trade, and the movement of people will also have to change. There are also indications that there is an increase in protectionist trends in the export of medicine and medical supplies.

Even if the pandemic can be a turning point in history, it is difficult to foresee if it has the power to accelerate changes that have occurred so far or to reverse the direction of those changes. Here I would like to mention a few points that I have been paying attention to since February 2020.

First is the issue of whether or not our motivation to attempt to cooperate (associate) while making efforts for mutual understanding has been weakened by a decrease in direct contact with other people due to the fear of infection. Technological innovations, particularly developments in information communications technology, in the last quarter century have greatly changed social lifestyles in only a single generation. This is due to the shift towards a reduction in direct contact between people. It is thought that this pandemic has further reinforced this trend.

We have learned a moderate sense of distance with others and a public consciousness through face to face contact. But many of our social interactions have been through uncertain and unstable means that dull our sense of distance from others. Do videos and short exchanges of words on tablets and smartphones create cooperation between people?

| Number of Deaths from COVID-19 and Seasonal Influenza in 2017 | | |
|---|-----------------|-----------------------------------|
| Country/Death | COVID-19 deaths | Seasonal influenza deaths in 2017 |
| United States | 156,747 | 40,905 |
| Brazil | 92,568 | 16,910 |
| Mexico | 46,688 | 6,075 |
| United Kingdom | 46,119 | 13,879 |
| India | 36,551 | 362,108 |
| Italy | 35,141 | 10,058 |
| France | 30,265 | 9,199 |
| Spain | 28,445 | 8,091 |
| Germany | 9,224 | 16,876 |
| Pakistan | 5,951 | 42,650 |
| Indonesia | 5,131 | 59,453 |
| China | 4,634 | 91,814 |
| Bangladesh | 3,111 | 36,590 |
| Japan | 1,006 | 38,951 |
| South Korea | 301 | 7,146 |

Note: Numbers released by RealClearPolitics as of the end of July 2020. The number of seasonal flu-related deaths is based on data from the CDC and the WHO, but it is possible that the numbers are overestimated for any of the countries above

Democracy inherently has the power to make people individualistic and separate. Adding in the habit of “social distancing” will surely increase people’s anonymity and decrease the ability to foster a shared mentality. The weakening of a shared mentality can undermine the framework of a healthy democracy.

The pandemic has delivered a great blow to urban areas in many countries. Up until now, the crowding and physical concentration of consumers and corporations has had the advantage of efficiency. However, we have had to rethink about urban scale and efficiency to disperse risk, which will surely start a trial and error process towards finding the right level of concentration.

Secondly, I once again learned how important “specific knowledge” that exists in the field is in making accurate judgments on matters, as Friedrich A. Hayek points out in his theory on economic systems. It is true that “general knowledge,” which could be made into a manual, forms the fundamental base of knowledge, but it is difficult to respond individually to extraordinary and atypical matters with this knowledge alone. The closely fought battles between central and regional areas that have occurred frequently with the pandemic have been about the necessity for the further decentralization of government that makes use of regional “specific knowledge.”

In university education, online courses seem to have also become quite widespread through on-site efforts. But we have come to learn that a variety of difficulties, including the ethical issues of fairness and honesty in particular, accompany the implementation of online courses. For example, how are exams administered online? At German universities, they are experimenting with time management and the prevention of cheating by introducing an exam monitoring app. We can see that ethical considerations are always necessary with new technologies, even for issues that appear small.

Social change cannot be expected with only education on science and technological hardware. The following point by Peking University professor Justin Y. Lin is very interesting as a historical argument.

Professor Lin points out that Chinese society produced a variety of inventions, including the compass, gunpowder, paper, printing, and steel technology. Even so, the major shift of the industrial revolution did not occur there. Lin says this is because China did not develop the culture of science as a social system. As long as a system to strictly observe intellectual integrity does not exist, the culture of science will not develop. Even if individual specific inventions sporadically appeared, the culture of science did not form in China. (From a quote by American economist, Paul M. Romer).



I am fully aware of the importance of realizing the obvious fact that there are things that we do not know with precision. It seems there is a saying that expresses this in natural science: the Age of the Moon and Clouds. The moon can be analyzed such that if you understand your current location and the law of motion, you can predict everything. However, clouds cannot be analyzed. It is difficult to predict even what will happen in two or three hours as clouds are full of unpredictability.

The meaning of this Age of the Moon and Clouds is that research with these two types of subjects can coexist while maintaining harmony.

This pandemic has once again underscored the fact that humans are living in a world like these clouds. Competition in research by experts over AI and big data may produce some definite analyticity, even in this world of clouds. However, the world of clouds is not going away. Science will not unravel the mystery itself to human existence.

Simply responding passively by predicting the post-coronavirus world and preparing for it will lead to surrendering oneself to this. Rather, I hope we can use this disaster as an opportunity to resist our tendencies and independently search for hints towards positive change for the future. This is because I feel a necessity to become free from the preconception that the old way was best and to take on an attitude of questioning the value of things.

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