Essay

Narrative Foresight and Covid-19: Successes and Failures in Managing the Pandemic

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Introduction

In this article, taking a text-based discourse approach (Shapiro, 1992), we outline narratives used to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and argue that some have been more and some less helpful for the current and future pandemic preparedness or shift to not only 'new' but a 'better normal'.

This work develops on earlier work by Milojević (2021, in press) where she focused on narrative foresight frames - the stories individuals, organizations, states and civilizations tell themselves about the future. It linked these narratives to futures fallacies, or detrimental thinking patterns about the future. The text selected were based on being public sector futures-oriented responses to COVID-19, that is, "key narratives in circulation during the implementation of governments' strategic objectives and the realization of visions of a 'pandemic-free' society (Milojević, 2021, in press).

This essay further develops the argument and organizes these narratives in terms of the discourses of blame, surprise/denial, exceptionalism, and alternatives of global solidarity, planning and social inclusion.

However, prior to these conclusions, we first explore the context of public policy responses: the rational-analytic versus the polis.

The Narrative Context of Public Policy Responses

In her influential *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, Deborah Stone outlines two basic models for political decision making (Stone, 2012). The first is the rational-analytic model. This model is based on the following assumptions:

> Reason forms basis for personal and government decisions. Facts, data, and information are neutral, and can settle conflicts. Individuals are rationally self-interested utility maximizers. They try to minimize costs and maximize benefits. Decision makers evaluate the costs and benefits of each course of action as accurately and completely as possible. The essence of rational decision-making is totally up the consequences of different alternatives and choose the one that yields the best results. (Stone, 2012, p. 260)

The polis model, on the other hand, more closely represents the way we make and understand public policy (Stone, 2012). This model is based on the following assumptions:

> Policy is about storytelling, ideas, and argument. Community is the major unit of composition with ideas, wills, goals etc. outside of the individual. There is a public interest beyond individual interests. Most policy problems are commons problems. Influence sometimes verging on coercion, cooperation, and

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loyalty are the major forms of interaction. Groups and organizations are the building blocks of the community. Information is never perfect. Some resources are scarce and rivalrous, but many are anti-rivalrous and abundant. (Stone, 2012, p. 32)

The first approach focuses on "cost benefit analysis", while the second focuses on "hidden storylines", commonly in the form of stated goals as "inspirational visions of a future, hoping to enlist the aid of others in bringing it about" (Stone, 2012, p. 252). In this latter approach, it is understood that the way a problem or an issue is framed critically influences the way alternative futures and solutions are constructed.

For example, during the global financial crisis over a decade ago, the *Financial Times* (Yergin, 2009) reported that at its heart this was a narrative crisis. How one creates national policy and strategy depends on the story one uses. Depending on the narrative used – i.e., a mortgage crisis, a banking crisis, a geo-political crisis of the shift to the Pacific (higher savings rates), a financial crisis, or even a crisis of capitalism – different strategies are created (Inayatullah, 2010). Some are shallow and short term oriented; others are deeper leading to foundational changes. Ultimately, in this example, solutions to deal with the deeper crisis (of capitalism) were eschewed, and Wall Street was saved at the expense of Main Street. Through massive spending, China also helped to save the world economy, and all returned to normalcy. The window of a possibility of structural change did not materialize.

We are in a similar turbulent situation today. As during the French Revolution, time is plastic: we have entered uncharted waters. What is the best national policy for dealing with COVID-19? Will the virus mutate and become even more dangerous? Will the vaccination strategy succeed? How severe or how long should lockdowns/quarantines be? It may be that once the crisis nears its end, many will be tempted to go back to the world we knew i.e., one where nature is still seen an externality, and profit is the core focus of all activities. However, as with the earlier financial crisis, this is also the opportunity to create a different world, to create structural changes in the global health system, in food safety, to begin with. As biosecurity expert Peter Black argues, "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It can become a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (Personal email, 6 April 2020).

What we do from here on - in response to COVID-19 pandemic and other challenges we currently globally face - will be decided by the narrative we use. It will also be decided by answering the following question: How much do we wish to change? As seen from many debates in relation to COVID-19, some people want to "go back to normal", yet others are still in various forms of denial in relation to the new reality. Parallel to this, various groups are promoting solutions focused on "changing the world radically" based on the worldviews and metaphors they employ. Here, we have seen the polarisation between those wishing for more government control, even repression, and those wishing to use this crisis to create a more inclusive, democratic, ecological, and benevolent world. Finally, each public policy sector has introduced various sets of reforms in attempts to address the crisis. These too are dependent on the framing of the issue, as well as the social, historical, and cultural context of each respective society.

Rational Vs Polis Model for Policy Making

If the rational model for policy making had been the one best explaining COVID-19 pandemic preparedness and best responses, we would have had a different set of countries leading the way here. For example, in the 2019 *Global Health Security Index (GHSI)*, an assessment of 195 countries' capacity to face infectious disease outbreaks – compiled largely by the US-based experts – it is the US which is ranked first in terms of overall preparedness score, followed by the UK, Netherlands, Australia and Canada (Cameron, Georghiou, Keenan, Miles, & Saritas, 2006). Considering the devastating COVID-19 death rate and other policy failures in the US, the authors of the GHSI have since provided a further elaboration as to the "significant preparedness gaps" in the US (GHSI, 2020):

> The United States' response to the COVID-19 outbreak to date shows that capacity alone is insufficient if that capacity isn't fully leveraged. Strong health systems must be in place to serve all populations, and effective political leadership that instils confidence in the government's response is crucial.

In addition to the pandemic preparedness, the stories and metaphors which circulated within societies provided a specific context for public policy responses. In broad strokes, we could argue, that due to the individualism and market orientation of societies or better say political leaderships in countries such as UK and US, the narrative

framing the response was the one of individual responsibility and techno-medical solutions (vaccination, cure). This framing is based on a particular conservative political worldview, which prioritises individual over social responsibility (Lakoff, 2011). It further prioritises the narrative of 'letting the market decide' over science, and short-termism/immediate gratification storylines over prevention/long-term outcomes.

While perhaps helpful for other social problems, the narrative frame – trust the market - has fallen short for the pandemic. Arguably, collectivist societies, as well as collectivist narratives/measures taken in western societies, coupled with reliance on science, have, so far, resulted in much better outcomes. Before we proceed with this argument any further, it is important to distinguish collectivism vis-à-vis totalitarianism, given how often these two social and political models are conflated. In a nutshell, what we assume under collectivism: primary is social responsibility – i.e., this is the consideration of how one's individual actions are impacting others and measures taken for the benefit of most, including the most vulnerable members of society. This contrasts with 'totalitarian model' of policy making, wherein:

> A central government produces slanted information predominantly aimed as a means of social control and tightly controls all news/information. Citizens, including 'elites', accept government propaganda, act like puppets, and do not decide for themselves. (Stone, 2012, p. 323)

While totalitarianism and democracy are mutually exclusive, it is entirely possible to have collectivist narratives and measures in the context of democratic societies. One example is New Zealand, where the Prime Minister was decisive, utilized evidence-based policies and WHO strategies, all the while ensuring that she had an overall shared narrative, what she called, "A team of five million" (Smith, 2020). Its neighbour, Australia, followed New Zealand's lead, in protecting the collective (i.e., some twenty-five million people) with the early and, some would argue, rather harsh closing of borders. The metaphor used early on was that of "we are all in this together" (Denniss, 2020). While the policy of closed borders is highly controversial (Stayner, 2020), the collectivist focus has resulted in several phases wherein there has been an almost complete elimination of the virus. As of 14 December 2020, Australia has gone ten days without a locally acquired case of COVID-19. In narrative terms, the decision was made to prioritise "lives over lifestyles". Long-term thinking and modelling played an important role. For example, in March 2020, the Australian federal government was preparing for 50,000 deaths in a best-case scenario and 150,000 deaths in the worst-case scenario (Davey, 2020). Largely due to various measures taken, as of 14 December 2020, Australia had recorded 908 total deaths from COVID-19, and 28,031 of total cases (Government of Australia, 2020). Eight hundred and twenty of those cases were in one Australian state, Victoria, largely because of the mismanagement of quarantine measures. Victoria thus first became a "cautionary tale of a second wave which killed hundreds and shattered the economy" due to several oversights in managing the pandemic. It later also became a "success story of a state which brought daily infections down from the high hundreds to zero" (Murray-Atfield, 2020a). The success came despite competing narratives aiming to avert the collectivist approaches which included severe lockdowns. Protests calling on the Victorian premier Daniel Andrews to "let us out" and "let us work" and framing him as a totalitarian leader (i.e., 'Chairman Dan', and 'Dictator Dan') failed. Instead, a formula of "strong political leadership, community engagement and public health measures" succeeded in eliminating the virus. The narrative used here, instead of 'individual responsibility', 'control', 'management', 'mitigation', 'light touch', (Moody, 2020) 'flattening the curve' and so on, as used in many comparable western countries, was that of 'aggressive suppression' instead. "If you do not crush this virus, it could crush you" was the narrative expressed by the Victorian Chief Health Officer (Murray-Atfield, 2020b). This storyline paved the way for the community's acceptance of difficult measures.

In addition to New Zealand and Australia, a similar strategy of suppression/elimination has been pursued by a limited number of countries/jurisdictions, including China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Fiji (Willis, 2020). While there are many differences between policy measures implemented in these countries (beyond the scope of this article), all have employed communal solutions to the issue of community transmission based on the collectivist worldview. These nations are amongst those which have been ranked as the most successful globally in dealing with COVID-19, as of December 2020 (Chang, Hong, & Varley, 2020). In addition to investment in public (i.e., collective) health infrastructure, social cohesion (inclusive of little inequality and a lot of discipline) has been a major factor behind the cohesive response of the country. This in turn has led to greater success in managing the pandemic (Chang et al., 2020).

Preparing for the Future

But what are the implications of the previous argument – the relevance of narrative and metaphor within the polis model of political decision-making – for the future, for alternative futures?

Clearly while there are many lessons from COVID-19, the most important one appears to be being adequately prepared for the future. At a basic level, this means not just having the ability to read emerging issues and weak signals but also being able to rapidly respond to these signals. More, advanced futures-preparedness means that foresight is institutionalized into one or multiple branches of government. Ultimately, of course, futures-preparedness means a citizenry that is futures literate (Miller, 2018). Returning to narrative, what metaphors and stories can help us move from being unprepared to being more prepared for the future, alternative futures?

In previous work, we argued that the multiple narratives used to manage COVID-19 could be organised across two variables, those that hinder and those that assist (Milojević, 2021, in press). We now categorize these approaches into meta-narratives – once again, those that hinder and those that assist. Three that hinder are: blame, surprise/denial and exceptionalism. On the other hand, those that assist are global solidarity, planning and social inclusion.

From Blame to Global Solidarity

The first unhelpful position is based on electoral politics with the goal of gaining political capital by blaming others. The narrative used, by, for example, the former President of the US, Donald Trump has been, "the China virus" or "kung flu." Blame can lead to a situation of a "battlefield" where the troops are rallied to fight the virus. The nation is seen as an organism, fighting the foreign virus. In addition, after blame, the worldviews of "herd immunity" and "natural selection" were used. This approach reduced preparedness and has resulted in nearly 350,000 deaths from COVID-19 in the USA by the end of 2020 (Bryant, 2021).

In contract to these narratives, there have been alternatives such as: "same story, different boats", "global solidarity", "viruses know no country", and "all lives matter." It is this second set of narratives, we argue, that is needed to be more adequately prepared for the future.

From Surprise and Denial to Planning

The second not so helpful frame or meta-narrative has been one of surprise. In this frame, the narrative has been, "who would have thought," "sit back and wait for the avalanche", and "never before" or a fatalistic "act of God". Linked to this approach is denial as in the narrative of it is "just the flu". These narratives ensure a lack of preparedness and lack of decisive action.

In contrast are the narratives of "time is running out, use it wisely," "pandemics are as certain as death and taxes", and "man vs microbe" – a part of our evolutionary history and thus not a surprise. As argued in previous work (Milojević, 2021, in press), challenging surprise/denial are also narratives such as "a new disease, a new approach" and "responding to signals amidst the noise".

From Exceptionalism to Social Inclusion

The third frame or meta-narrative that hindered adequate preparedness and response has been exceptionalism, i.e., everyone else but me or my tribe or group. The most vulnerable (who are not 'us') are to be sacrificed via "only those with pre-existing conditions" (sick and elderly) narrative. The language used has been "not me, not us," or "out of sight, out of mind." Singapore, for example, had been a success story but it was remiss on COVID-19 strategies for poorer and neglected migrant workers. Their harsh working conditions – cramped, lack of access to medical care, lack of information on COVID-19 measures – led to an outbreak which then spread. This was also true for Sweden. (Gustavsson, 2020). The nation eschewed strict quarantine for trusting its citizens, but its policies did not create adequate safeguards for those in elderly homes and migrant communities, and thus the nation is ranked poorly in comparison to its neighbours.

An alternative and more futures-prepared narrative is that of "all of us are vulnerable" and "all in this together."

Conclusion

Narrative (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015) thus as we have argued throughout this paper is decisive in which futures emerge and which do not.

The narratives and metaphors used to inform policy-based decisions, as per the polis model, seem to have trumped pandemic preparedness in terms of resources and systems previously put in place. As argued by Deborah Stone, political reasoning always involves "metaphor-making and category-making, but not just for beauty's sake or for insight's sake" (Stone, 2012, p. 12). Rather, it is a "strategic portrayal for persuasion's sake and, ultimately, for policy's sake." (Stone, 2012, p. 12)

This is about shifting the discourse to future pandemic preparedness using approaches that work. These we have argued tend to be collectivism using evidence-based science within a narrative of inclusion, taking the New Zealand narrative of a "team of five million" to a planet of eight billion people. We close this essay with a warning i.e., COVID-19 may be a portal to a new world, but it is certainly a warning to prepare for a dangerous world ahead and do our best to ensure that the Age of Pandemics is short lived (Inayatullah & Roper, 2020).

Acknowledgements

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