

# How not to waste a crisis (v1)

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**Wars are always dramatic accelerators of change, as are crises of any kind. Coronavirus could turn out to be just be a one-off blip, with normal service resuming once the worst of it is over. But it could be a step change, and one that's used to accelerate changes that were long overdue.**

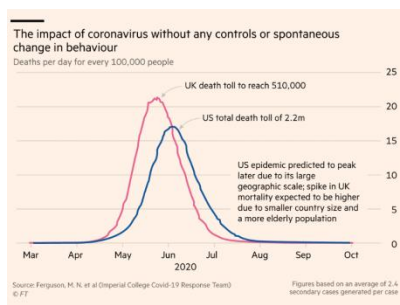
There has been a flood of predictable articles on what might come next, mostly backing the authors' hobby horses. I've seen ones proclaiming that COVID will lead to the end of capitalism, the end of globalisation, a transformation of our relationship to nature and many other things, none of which look very plausible.

I am not an expert on epidemics so will make no comment on how this one might pan out. But we have already seen an extraordinary reassertion of big government, with COVID-19 serving as an extreme stress test for governments of all kinds and some patterns are already becoming clear (which will be usefully documented in [this new tracker](#) from the Blavatnik School at Oxford).

Here I attempt a first look at some of what might happen in relation to government once the crisis is over, and some tentative first lessons (which I will update regularly).

**Openness:** the story of this crisis confirms what we should already know: the vital importance of free flows of information. China's disastrous early moves (denial, attacking whistle-blowers etc) confirmed that, though fortunately China then became

one of the most effective at containing the virus, and showed the world that case isolation, distancing and testing could arrest the spread. Yet the absence of independent statistics in China means there is valid scepticism about whether any of the numbers can be believed. Part of the lesson is that societies can think much more effectively and quickly if they're open and mobilise many brains. Overly hierarchical and



authoritarian governments struggle for this reason – there are too many incentives to cover up uncomfortable facts. Taiwan has been a particularly [a good example](#) of radical transparency, combining bottom up civic creativity and technocratic efficiency. Many others have gone a long way in opening up their analysis, data, models and reasoning, so that they can be critiqued and improved. The crucial lesson is that we often need more models, and better models, and more interrogation of models rather than fetishising any single model, as some governments and media commentary have done. Indeed, the opening up of models to scrutiny could be a big shift and point to a future where many aspects of government are informed by open and competing models, and visible learning when they turn out to be right or wrong.

**Data:** the crisis has prompted an extraordinary range of voluntary initiatives around data such as [Data USA](#). It is also highlighting the new tools available to governments



to observe, monitor and predict. The most impressive examples have included Singapore's contact tracking methods, south Korea's massive testing programme helped by data, and the use of mobile phone and travel data across east Asia. Seoul's use of, and [sharing of data](#) is particularly remarkable (with, still, zero deaths in a city of 11m). Although many of these methods raise questions about civil liberties they also point to what could become possible around climate change

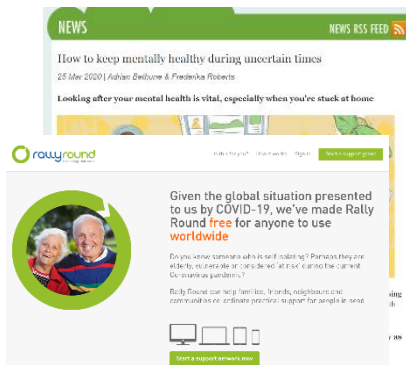
and other challenges. My guess is that the conventional reaction against these – which only emphasises individual privacy - will look anachronistic. Instead we will move on to the arrangements needed to [govern data and data-sharing](#) in the public interest.

**Anticipation:** the crisis is showing the potential power of anticipatory governance. In



whether in education, health or welfare, and using data and SMS as proactive tools.

Singapore for example [40% of those tested were contacted by the government](#) rather than self-presenting, because contact data showed they had been close to people with COVID-19. There are many other fields where government could operate in much more anticipatory ways – spotting and preventing problems rather than only curing them,



**Civic mobilisation:** everywhere we are seeing an extraordinary mobilisation of societies to look after the isolated and elderly. The UK for example has just mobilised over half a million volunteers in a day for the health service, using the [GoodSam app](#) (developed by Nesta). Other examples like RallyRound use platform technologies to orchestrate circles of support for those in need. These point to what should be being done anyway

as societies face epidemics of loneliness and the need for radical overhauls of care systems that can't only rely on paid professionals. But we will need much more comprehensive systems to handle work that lies between traditional paid jobs on the one hand, and traditional volunteering on the other.

**Welfare:** the extraordinary moves to put in place income support for individuals, and cash support for businesses, point to a very different possible future for government.



For example, some countries already have single accounts for businesses and citizens which in principle make it much easier to loan money on different terms, or to introduce new kinds of universal basic income

(Singapore's MyInfo and Central Addressing System is one example; India's Aadhaar another; Nemkonto in Denmark). The absence of these has greatly hampered action in some countries.

**Mental health:** large scale isolation puts a big pressure on mental health, and manifests in domestic violence, depression, anxiety, particular challenges for young men. Governments in the past have only concerned themselves with the most acute cases – but population level mental health is fast becoming a policy concern (not least because of growing evidence on how different interventions can have an impact). The work of organisations like Action for Happiness, with strongly evidenced interventions to improve everyday mental health could be further integrated into public policy.

Finally, I turn to two meta issues for how government operates that have come into focus in recent weeks.

**Command, control and decentralisation:** people are often instinctively in favour either of strong central powers or of decentralisation. But the most successful



responses to COVID-19 use hybrids that combine great centralisation and great decentralisation. For some tasks – like shifting economic policy or deciding on isolation rules – countries need legitimate central command structures that can work very quickly, with full authority, and drawing on the best available insights of many different agencies. But they also need to link into highly decentralised capacities that can improvise in the

light of local conditions, and rapid learning from each level of the system (I've described these in the past as 'triggered hierarchies'). The command parts have often been put in place quite well – the learning systems are much less impressive.

**Global collaboration:** the other meta issue is the weakness of international cooperation, despite the efforts of the WHO. This is once again highlighting the vital need for better coordination mechanisms – sharing data, knowledge, learning, equipment and expertise; joint action on vaccines; or collaboration on sharing intensive care facilities. The global bottom up systems have worked well – first spotting the outbreak [and its risks](#), [mapping innovations](#), and then crowd-sourcing solutions. But intergovernmental cooperation has looked sluggish and inept. Hopefully the age of anti-multilateralism may be coming to an end.

The next few months will bring intensive learning on how to manage the crisis, as well exit strategies. But we also need to start planning for the peace too. What new methods can be adapted from the crisis, particularly to slower burn crises like climate change? What new ways of thinking has it thrown up?

In a later blog I will return to the 'intelligence design' and 'intelligence assemblies' aspect of COVID-19 which I have written about extensively in the past (the improvised systems now being put in place for Coronavirus have obvious potential parallels for other issues, notably climate change). I am probably too obsessed with this. But to my eyes COVID-19 is making it much more obvious why we so badly need a new discipline and practice around mobilising intelligence assemblies – which is very different to traditional silo-based systems and to the recent consumerist focus of digital teams in governments.

So we should never waste a crisis. An incredible amount of thought, creativity and commitment is going into the responses. We should start also thinking hard about how to harness some of this for the longer term.

