

An Epidemic of Stupidity & Authoritarianism

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March 9, 2020

COVID-19 – known as the coronavirus – emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan. It's flu-like symptoms enabled the quick spread of the virus within the city. It also allowed the spread of the disease beyond Wuhan despite the attempts of the Chinese government to curb it by resorting to drastic measures of arresting and detaining suspected carriers.

Now it has spread globally. As of March 5th, 2020, 97,893 people have been infected worldwide with 7100 cases being regarded as serious. 3353 people have died of whom approximately 3013 were in China and 340 in other countries. The most serious outbreaks outside China have been in northern Italy, Iran and South Korea. The rates in many countries may be under-reported because of health officials refusing to test people reporting flu symptoms, especially Japan. The virus has impacted an estimated 87 countries and territories. 53,786 people have recovered from the virus. (Statistics from various government health agencies as charted in the webpage en.wikipedia.org) According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), it takes about five days from exposure before people manifest the symptoms of the coronavirus. Not surprisingly the elderly, very young children and those with respiratory problems are most at risk.

What is noteworthy about the coronavirus isn't the virus itself. It has been the fear, misinformation and over the top reactions including panic buying that has occurred in many countries including here in New Zealand where there have been five confirmed cases of the coronavirus at the time of writing (1 News, 6th March 2020).

Conspiracy theories and misinformation have not only fuelled racism against East Asians, especially the Chinese and Koreans, but it has also hampered attempts to deal with the virus. Many of the claims being made by conspiracy theorists have included that it is a form of population control, a bio-weapon unleashed by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) against various governments currently at odds with the United States (“China coronavirus: Misinformation spreads online”. BBC News Online . 30 January 2020). Alternatively, the coronavirus was created by the United States government to enable American businesses to make a profit on the vaccines being used to fight the virus. (Rubio, Marco: “Marco Rubio: Russia, China, and Iran are waging disinformation war over coronavirus”. New York Post. 3rd March 2020. Considering Marco Rubin is a Republican Senator and Member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Committee on Foreign Relations his comments should be treated with discretion.)

The conspiracy theories surrounding the coronavirus are similar to those that claimed that the Ebola virus, AIDS/HIV and the SARS virus were all secretly created in labs by the CIA. These

conspiracy theories have been peddled by various government agencies in the Middle East and Russia for many years as well as thoroughly discredited anti-vaccination campaigners, shock jock conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones (of InfoWars infamy) and various YouTube channels. (Ghaffary, Shirin (31 January 2020). “Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube struggle with coronavirus hoaxes”. Vox .)

Just as disturbing has been the accusations that health authorities have deliberately withheld or downplayed the true numbers of people who have been infected by the coronavirus. Such claims have surfaced on various social media sites and have even been repeated in many traditional media outlets in which it has been alleged that Chinese and Taiwanese officials have lied about the true numbers of people who've been infected by the coronavirus. (BBC online, January 30th, 2020)

Most governments have followed the recommendations of the WHO on their website page Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public. That is, for people who have been to northern Italy, Iran, South Korea, and China to be quarantined for about fourteen days and for people who think they may have been infected to get tested as soon as possible. To avoid the possible spread of the virus such people are being encouraged to call their local Health provider rather than turn up in person. People are also being told to be more vigilant about basic hygiene like washing hands with sanitizer after handling food, using the toilet or coming into contact with people who might have flu-like symptoms. If people cough or sneeze they should do so into the crook of their elbows rather than their hands. If they have flu-like symptoms they should wear a surgical mask. People are encouraged to practice social distancing, such as not shaking hands. The taking of such precautionary measures has helped to slow the rate of infections in some countries.

There has been one exception to this: the United States. Rather than addressing the virus Trump and other members of his administration have been spreading misinformation. In an interview with Sean Hannity on March 4th, he claimed the WHO had exaggerated the numbers of people infected by the virus and that the potential impact of the coronavirus is part of a Democrat plot against him. He has also misled or lied about the United State's government's ability to deal with the coronavirus by claiming their measures to contain it are airtight and that the virus is no more serious than the outbreak of the seasonal flu. (Walters, Joanna; Aratani, Lauren (5 March 2020). “Trump calls WHO's global death rate from coronavirus ‘a false number’”. The Guardian .)

As a result, there has been no consistent response from federal agencies. Apart from Trump peddling misinformation about the coronavirus, it has largely been left up to the various states to decide how to address the problem. The result has been that many people with flu-like symptoms are getting contradictory information, not being able to undertake any tests unless they have medical insurance and not even getting told what self-imposed quarantine involves. This means that many people may be spreading the coronavirus without being aware of it and that the cases that have been reported may be an under-estimate. (The U.S. Response to Coronavirus Is Uneven: It Depends on Where You Live, Wall Street Journal, March 4th, 2020) .The response of the United States government shows what happens when a so-called democracy is in the hands of a narcissist who peddles conspiracy theories and is confronted by a crisis as serious as this.

The Chinese government's response to the coronavirus went to the other extreme. The full power of the authoritarian regime was deployed to deal with the coronavirus epidemic. According to the livescience.com website article, China gets ‘mixed report card’ in its coronavirus response. How will the US do? (March 2nd, 2020) the initial response was to arrest the doctor who

first brought the coronavirus to the attention of the world and to clamp down hard on the reporting of the number of cases and even fudging the criteria of diagnosing cases to make the figures look lower than was the case. They also dismissed Wuhan authorities who raised the alarm about the impact of the coronavirus in Wuhan. They also refused to accept assistance from the U.S Centre for Disease Control and the WHO at a point when the assistance could've made a major difference.

The Chinese government was responsible for "instituting the largest public health experiment in the history of humankind, which is the quarantine of Wuhan [city] in Hubei province," using methods that included arresting and forcibly detaining people who were suspected of having the coronavirus in their homes and censoring any criticism of their methods such as its quarantine measures or the facilities that were rapidly built to isolate and treat people with the coronavirus. Live Science also pointed out that "It's difficult, however, to see how effective the quarantine is because China hasn't consistently studied the virus' spread among subpopulations... According to a Feb. 28 opinion piece in the journal JAMA, "it appears that the strict measures China took may have 'bought the world some time' but did not prevent the global dissemination of SARS-CoV-2," the virus that causes the disease COVID-19." In other words, there's no way of knowing if the methods used by the Chinese government in Wuhan have worked.

From my perspective, the responses of both the American and Chinese governments have been pretty much the same: pretend that the problem isn't so bad and that there are systems in place to deal with it, use the epidemic to stomp on basic human rights such as being detained without trial and freedom of movement and accuse anyone trying to highlight the seriousness of the epidemic of being part of a conspiracy or plotting to bring down the government. The difference between the Americans and the Chinese is that the Chinese don't pretend to be a democracy that pays lip service to the notion of being a government "of the people, for the people and by the people".

What people need is accurate, openly available and reliable information about what is going on so that we, as individuals and local communities, can take the necessary steps to protect each other. That means paying attention to the people who have expert knowledge about flu epidemics. It means not listening to some ignorant pissant sitting behind their computer peddling the latest piece of crap from the 8chan website, an anti-vaccination website or from a President who thinks the answer to dealing with an epidemic that has killed over 33,000 people worldwide is to hold a prayer meeting and to blame his opponents. It means using science and sense, not stupidity and authoritarianism.

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