

COVID-19: Misinformation, Education and the Need for Clarity

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The recent explosion of COVID-19 cases in the South East Asian region has contributed to the globally growing pandemic that has impacted our global social order and may have many dramatic unforeseen consequences to come.

It has exposed the fragility of our dynamic inter-connected systems, the lack of adequate response from world leaders in an aggressively deteriorating situation, and perhaps worst of all, the apathy and ignorance of a significant segment of the global population to the severity of the pandemic.

It is not necessary to re-cap here on the origins of the COVID-19 virus. Beginning in China, the virus ultimately found its way to West Asia, South East Asia, Australia, Europe (which has been the worst hit to date, even surpassing China in some respects) and ultimately America. The danger it presents is indisputable, especially to the most vulnerable of us.

Governments have issued various controls to help contain the spread of the virus, but has had limited success. The virus infection rates still continue to rise as medical infrastructures are now being strained, with a frightening prospect that when overburdened, the death tolls will begin to rise, much like the case of Italy.

But why is the spread of the virus still increasing and the situation still deteriorating?

A lot has to do with the continuous movement of people who are spreading the virus around and abroad, despite movement control orders that have been issued to curb and control such movements.

France and the United States of America still see mass gatherings occurring. Italy before the pandemic crippled the country had a lax attitude towards the severity of the disease and disregarded the government's advice to maintain social distancing. This is also happening in South East Asia with the recent Muslim Tabligh gathering in Malaysia, with an estimated 12, to 16 thousand people attending. This particular incident was one of the catalysts for the recent spike in Covid-19 cases in Malaysia and South East Asia.

Is this incident the fault of an apathetic populace or a group that is inately selfish as to put the lives of others at risk for their own pursuits?

Not entirely.

While it is true that there were many who were more adamant about attending such gatherings, rather than obeying the movement control orders out of some misplaced notion

of religiosity, individualism or human rights, the truth is many were also not aware of the severity of the virus's impact upon the larger community, because of ignorance, or having been taken in by half-truths and fiction from various sources that had spread false information and "fake news".

Information, that emphasizes the allegedly low death rates associated with of the virus; that the virus only survives in certain climates; that it is no worse than the common cold; and even the latest on how the virus can be treated with simply drinking warm water to flush out the virus from one's system, have all contributed towards prevailing misunderstandings and misconceptions about Covid-19.

This illustrates one of the greatest ironies of our times, in that social media, while it has enabled us to become more connected and informed, has also allowed for such fallacies to spread and pollute discourse and thus affect policy and decision-making.

And the bureaucracy of the larger governments, slow-moving as is their nature, were not quick enough in many instances, to address the rumors and misinformation in an effective manner. By the time they acted, the virus had spread to such a degree, that lockdown and containments were the only drastic options left.

Many of the falsities are still being propagated to this day with some members of the elite classes and "well-learned" members of the public still defying movement controls and arguing technicalities over the directive.

Governments need to play a more dynamic role in the face of this crisis, but they also need to draw a lesson from this crisis as well, that education of the population, clear directions and communications are also important to manage a crisis such as this.

Liberties are important in times of peace, but a clear leadership is needed in times of crisis.

There has been a lot of slow and overly cautious response from the governments and not enough pro-active decision making. People have been stricken by the disease because of all the misinformation, lack of education on the situation, and poor forms of governance in managing it.

Should there be a much larger threat looming on the horizon, far worse than COVID-19, given our current handling of the crisis, it is truly doubtful we could manage the next one at all.

However, with all the gloom that has been addressed, the ray of hope that can be gleaned is the willingness of so many people to stand vigilant against wrongdoings and misinformation.

The dedication and proactiveness of the medical community who argue against such misinformation, while serving on the frontlines to battle the disease is commendable.

The police and law enforcement personnel who are out there enforcing the movement control order putting themselves at risk to help the community retain a semblance of order also deserve our accolades.

The people who continuously reach out to educate others of the disease and of the important steps to take in managing it, while calling out those who continue to disregard the severity of the situation, are also doing a commendable job.

All these groups and others I have not highlighted could play a constructive role, once the crisis is over. They could help Malaysia and the world to be better, stronger and wiser.

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