

#COVIDTIMES: Social experiments, liminality and the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

On the 22nd of March 2020, the Australian government announced Stage 1 restrictions in response to the global coronavirus pandemic (Johnson and Smale, 2020). Since then, numerous nation-wide measures have been implemented in an effort to control the rate of transmission and minimise the pandemic's negative impact on the Australian people and the economy, ranging from lockdowns and stay-at-home orders to border closures and extensive contact tracing systems. As a growing body of research emerges exploring the efficacy and consequences of these strategies, there is an opportunity to reflect on their social and cultural impacts. In this paper I propose two analytical lenses through which to understand these impacts, framing the pandemic firstly as an (unplanned) social experiment which has transformed and illuminated our relationships with digital technologies, and secondly as a liminal moment and a shared set of social experiences.

Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic; that is, there was the worldwide spread of a new disease. The last such declaration had been made on June 11, 2009, with “swine flu,” or the H1N1 influenza virus. That declaration, in turn, drew on lessons learnt from the SARS outbreak in 2002. Yet very little of the world's experience of the 2009 pandemic, or indeed the various outbreaks of SARS (2002–2004), MERS (2012), and Ebola (2014–2016) would prepare us for what would happen next — though the blueprint for how to handle the COVID-19 pandemic owes much to prior outbreak management, including quarantines, border closures and selective quarantining. The WHO's 2020 declaration triggered action at a speed and scale that was new and startling.

The pandemic has disrupted everything, from the global flow of goods and services to the actions that individuals can take in their daily lives. The estimated economic impact on both Australia and the world at large is significant, with growing unemployment and uncertainty about the future of the globalised economy, and with some countries expected to enter a recession in the next year. Throughout the first year of the pandemic, governments all over the world enacted a range of measures to mitigate and control the impact of COVID-19, including border closures, travel restrictions, stay-at-home orders, economic stimulus packages, and wide-sweeping public health measures, including contact tracing technologies and processes, mandatory masks, and quarantines. Many of these measures were enacted repeatedly, as the virus spread and mutated and as our social systems attempted to adapt and

manage in response. Strategies around containment, management, and elimination have been adopted, rejected, or adopted anew, and the complexities of mass vaccination campaigns have roiled many nation states.

Nearly a year after COVID-19 was first declared a pandemic, there have been over 114 million cases and over 2.5 million deaths (WHO, 2021). The human toll and impact will continue to unfold for years, touching everything from health to education and employment; there remains little to no clear consensus about how or when this pandemic might end, or about how daily life might look in its aftermath.

There will be many accounts written about this period and about its consequences. However, even now, as we remain in the midst of the pandemic, there is significant insight to be gained from the ways in which we are experiencing it, collectively and individually. How we make sense of this moment, and how it might inform what comes next, in terms of new practices, values and even rules, feels generative. Likewise, an analysis of our passages through the pandemic could help illuminate possible opportunities for meaningful social, political, institutional, and individual transformations.

Australia and COVID-19

By early April 2020, more than half the world's population was in some form of state-sanctioned lock-down (Kaplan et al., 2020; Sandford, 2020; Storrow, 2020; Woods, 2020), and the use of stay-at-home orders and other forms of restrictions have continued globally ever since, with some countries closing their borders completely and others entering into the second and third periods of city, region and state-wide lockdowns.

In Australia, our first stay-at-home orders came in effect late March, when the Australian government announced that all Australians were to stay home, and we would, at a nation-wide level, attempt to “flatten the curve” (Johnson & Smale, 2020). There were four categories of exceptions to the stay-at-home mandate: health care; shopping for food and basic supplies; exercise; and essential jobs. The logic behind the stay-at-home orders were two-fold: slow the rates of transmission, and make it possible for the nationwide public health systems to prepare for a predicted inflow of patients.

In early May, the co-ordination between the federal and state governments in Australia gave way to a patchwork of responses and restrictions that have persisted ever since, including state border closures, travel bans, and quarantines. These responses have included a variety of stay-at-home orders, ranging from short, sharp closures, “circuit breakers” (Adelaide, November 2020; Perth, Brisbane, January 2021; Melbourne, February 2021), to longer and more protracted restrictions, including an unprecedented 111-day stay-at-home order in Victoria which, combined with a nightly curfew, restricted mobility, and border closures (August–October 2020).

As a result of these interventions and continued travel restrictions, border closures and aggressive public health measures, Australia has recorded only 29,000 cases and a little over 900 deaths since the first case appeared in Australia in January of 2020 (Australian Department of Health, 2021). There will be much written about the economic impact and the various government mechanisms implemented to ameliorate the worst harms here in Australia. Likewise, the social and cultural impacts which have

been far reaching, offer much upon which to reflect and learn. In this paper, I want to offer just two possible avenues of analysis of the social and cultural impacts here in Australia: the pandemic as (unplanned) social experiment; and the pandemic as liminal.

The pandemic as social experiment

The immediacy and scale of the various stay-at-home orders here in Australia created massive social change in a very short time. From the initial nationwide stay-at-home orders in March 2020, to the various state and city restrictions, one way to think about the pandemic is as a series of significant social experiments here in Australia. Of course, these “experiments” were unplanned, frequently ran without a control group, and were certainly not something to which we, as participants, had anything resembling informed consent or an ability to decline to participate. That said, there is much we can learn from the impact of the pandemic on our daily lives, and especially regarding the role of technology in our daily lives. The lessons we could draw from this period might help inform public policy, regulation, and standards, as well as future state, national and private investments in everything from infrastructure to training.

Here are just five areas in outline, related to technology in our daily lives, we could choose to examine further:

Remote work

The feasibility of remote working was abruptly tested in late March and early April of 2020, with organisations small and large transitioning to a remote workforce within days or weeks. This has created new ways to work, and tested underlying infrastructure, technical literacy, and availability of equip-

ment. It made more visible long-standing social and economic inequities, especially around gender (Johnston et al., 2020). What quickly became clear was remote work was more than just giving someone a webcam on a laptop: it meant changing the nature of how an organisation functions, the purpose of meetings, and organisational processes and structures, including how new employees are on-boarded, and teams are cultivated.

Online education

Making online education successful is more than just putting your PowerPoint slides online or settling a student in front of a laptop. During the pandemic, the efficacy of online, digitally enhanced, and/or remote education learning experiences has been tested with a range of student demographics (from primary and secondary school to university, to professional training). Students have encountered new forms of learning, and the changes have revealed complex layers of infrastructural, pedagogical, social, and familial challenges, as well as reinforcing some of the oft-encountered challenges for regional and remote communities (Armour et al., 2020), and revealing new forms of tacit labour in the home as parents became teachers’ aides and technical support.

Telehealth services

The pandemic has seen the Australian Government introduce temporary measures to increase the scope of telehealth coverage under the Medicare Benefits Scheme (MBS) to cover the entire population due to its effectiveness in triaging and monitoring COVID-19 cases — a quality already demonstrated in countries such as Singapore and South Korea. An unforeseen consequence of this has been greater insight into the poten-

tial benefits of telehealth, and it appears that government moves to roll back these measures are already meeting resistance from medical practitioners (Maguire, 2020; Hunt, 2020; Seselja, 2020). After all, being able to see your doctor at the appointed time without having to think about parking or worrying about how you are going to manage your children or how you are going to get into the office seems like a positive step.

Online shopping and payments

The closure of brick-and-mortar stores driven by pandemic-related public health measures such as social distancing has been accompanied by a rapid uptake in Australia's traditionally laggard e-commerce industry, with 5.2 million Australians shopping online in April 2020 — the highest number ever recorded at the time, and 31% higher than the 2019 average (Australia Post, 2020; Mortimer et al., 2020). This has put pressure on delivery systems and payments systems, and raises questions about the future of certain kinds of physical spaces. This online shopping boom has also created a wave of new data, unexpectedly impacting algorithms that help determine supply chains, goods, and future purchases.

Australia is already well-known for its high adoption rate of contactless “tap and go” payment methods, and COVID-19 has only encouraged this trend by transforming contactless payment from a convenience to a hygiene necessity. This continued move towards a cashless economy has catalysed discussion about the operation and equity of our existing cashless infrastructure (Letts, 2020; Collett, 2020).

Data privacy

The trade-off between safety and privacy has become very real, with the need for rapid, accurate contact tracing to help contain the spread of COVID-19, and the use of digital technologies and data to help in those efforts (Bell, 2020; Bell et al., 2020). The public debate around the use and efficacy of the COVIDSafe app made it clear that issues of privacy, trust and data collection remain sensitive ones in Australia. The rapid proliferation of state-based, commercial and local check-in mechanisms have unfolded with considerably less debate around data use, security and trust, but have nonetheless continued to thrust these issues into the spotlight. The nascent debate about a “vaccination passport” again proposes to bring these issues to the fore (Bell, 2020; Hern, 2021).

From data collection to action: next steps?

It is not yet clear which of these unintended experiments, and the many others that are ongoing, will most profoundly change us, and which will fade in a post-pandemic recovery. However, all these unplanned social experiments and their results are revelatory for how we might design a post-pandemic Australia. Clearly, during this period, we have experienced changes in how we use, think, and feel about digital technologies. Are these trends and opportunities revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic ones we could amplify or accelerate, or that we could remediate and fix for good?

As with all good experiments, even the unplanned ones, there comes a moment to move from data collection to action. While the pandemic is clearly still shaping Australian daily life, there are lessons we can

draw from the first year that could inform both public policy and commercial activity, especially regarding the importance of robust data, information and communication networks and equity of access to the same. Likewise, it is again clear that the availability of networks and equity of access must also be accompanied by significant investment in the tools, processes, security, and skills necessary to successfully utilise those networks.

The pandemic as a rite of passage

During the arc of the pandemic so far, we have variously come out of homes, gone back into homes and closed, opened, reclosed, and reopened all manner of social and commercial enterprises, as well as city, state and national borders. How would one start to talk about these experiences beyond the personal narratives? Are there ways of thinking about the pandemic as a structural social moment? Perhaps our experiences of the pandemic could also be understood as a set of shared social experiences, not just experiments. Through this lens, we might reflect on the pandemic as a journey, or as a way we have occupied time and space over the last twelve months, and in particular the ways in which these experiences of time and space are unlike those which came before (Bell, 2021).¹

At the turn of the last century, the Belgian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep wrote about the ways in which different cultures structure their movements through time and space ([1960] 2019): how

we, as humans, make passages through the world. He was particularly interested in how such passages through time and space could have a common ritual structure, and what the nature of those structures might be. In articulating his theories around such rites of passage, he also articulated a time and space in between. He called this *liminal*, or *liminality*. He, and his followers, would define it as having the quality of ambiguity or disorientation, the middle moment between what was and what will become (Turner, [1969] 2008: 94). He would also go on to write about the rites and rituals that both begin and end a period of liminality, rites and rituals of separation and re-incorporation (Van Gennep, [1960] 2019: 21). This feels like one way to think about, or theorise, our experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Liminality, as a way to describe the moment between moments and the places between places, is a concept that seems to resonate with the Australian experience of the pandemic (Bell, 2021).

This theoretical frame seems especially evocative now. Is one way to approach the pandemic and to talk about its consequences to think about it as a liminal moment? And if so, what are the pieces of that liminality? During this first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, have certain spaces or times been liminal, what work were they doing culturally/socially, what work we are doing in them, and how have we transited in and out of them? Perhaps framing our experiences of the pandemic through this lens might offer a different kind of conversation.

Six liminal frames

My team and I went and looked at all the kinds of conversations people were having; the formal pieces, the governmental pieces,

¹ For many Australians, the feelings of ambiguity, unfamiliarity and dislocation pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic, given that 70 to 80 per cent of the Australian population were also impacted by drought, bushfires, and smoke (Biddle et al., 2020).

the individual responses, and we saw the outlines of six themes of this liminal stage. These threads revolve around temporality, embodiment, intermediation, mobility, relationships and identity (for a further explication, see Bell, 2021).

Temporality

The destabilising of our shared understanding of time is an obvious characteristic of this COVID-19-induced liminal moment. For many, days blurred into each other,² likewise weeks and months. The contours of time were flattened, and its cadence had new patterns: what once moved fast that now moves slow, what once moved slow that now moves fast.

Presence and embodiment

There have been transformations in ideas about presence and embodiment. At its most straightforward, the physical became virtual. We have reimagined the physical, the virtual, the digital, and the analogue, and in so doing also challenged ideas of how things do and do not move. After all, in this moment, certain forms of embodiment were seen as being dangerous, a classic hallmark of liminality. Being present was seen as being dangerous and we have actively re/calibrated our senses of our social selves to maintain “safe” distances.

Intermediation and services

How things are being intermediated has been unexpectedly hyper-visible during the pandemic. We have had to both encounter seams, borders and boundaries we had not previously seen, and then also manage them. This extended from the seams of the public and the private to the (non-)movements of

goods and services where they once did not have to move quite like that, and in the movements of people. Who has had to become a policer of these seams who wouldn't have been otherwise — parents, health-care workers, retail staff, hospitality workers, soldiers, police? Some of those seams and instances of intermediation have been long invisible and are now starkly visible — state borders would be one obvious example, likewise food supply changes. The notion of what moved and what did not, and how those things moved and having to know where they came from, is at least one form of intermediation that is now visible. Whether these seams and movements will become invisible again later is complicated. Whether we can forget them again, doubly so.

Mobility

The pandemic has been characterised by changing ideas about what could move, what should move, what should not move but did anyway, and where we had fears about things moving. This involves regulating human movement, for example negotiating the 25 kilometre border around Melbourne in the second lock-down (August 2020) and the restrictions on fly-in, fly-out workers in Western Australia mines; restricting human movement, through closing our national boundaries and thus redefining what it means to be an Australian living abroad who can call Australia home but can't physically come home; and the movement of ideas rather than bodies, where you might be part of a global community you can only see through a digital screen. These are not just questions of privilege and who is able to move, these are questions of positionality that feel as yet unresolved, but very complicated.

² Hence, “Blursday” [Ed.]

There is also, in some ways, still an emerging science concerning a whole other set of mobilities. An ongoing set of questions surrounding how a virus moves, whether it is airborne and if so, what is a safe distance from others and how can we control certain spaces, as well as how we imagine what it means to have an infected body, where they will move and how they will be treated suggests that this particular part of this liminal moment is deeply contested.

Relationships

In Australia during the early days of both the pandemic and the first lockdowns nationwide, there was a lot of borrowed language about “we’re all in it together.” That language started at a community level; a grassroots statement from households and communities wanting to articulate a degree of communal activity that was admirable and distinctly Australian. The contradistinction between the broader Australian experience of the pandemic and others — for instance the American experience — means the responsive relationship between citizens and their elected officials and their scientific and health advisors has been on display almost daily.

Nonetheless, that language of relationships, of “being in it together,” has become more complicated. Public health rules made it complicated to be together when you had to constantly consider who your relatives were, whom you were close to, who counted in your “bubble” and who was in your household. Similarly, our notions about what constituted safe connectivity and safe connection, as well as what it meant to be a social creature all fluxed.

Identity

Notions about personhood and identity, who and what we are, have been hotly contested during this pandemic period: from the “weaponizing” of demographics — for example, blaming millennials or claiming we are over protecting boomers, to the fraught use of “Karen” as a pejorative. The impact of this moment in time was felt unevenly, and that unevenness follows a set of well-rehearsed social and cultural inequities. Women have so far borne the brunt of managing home schooling, and women’s careers were more precarious and have suffered as various parts of the economy have been shuttered. What state were you in — in a geographic sense, not an emotional one — has mattered too. That our experiences were so inflected by our geographic locations suggests some very localised encounters with the liminal. Who we will be on the other side of this, as individuals, families, communities, as well as consumers and citizens, is yet to be revealed.

Exiting liminality

How and when this pandemic will end is unclear. We now have vaccines, but there are many questions regarding their efficacy, longevity and availability; for now, Australia’s national borders remain (mostly) closed. So, at least at one level, we are still, collectively, in a liminal moment. This means we could choose to contemplate how we might exit it, and in this exiting, make deliberate decisions.

Van Gennep, too, was interested in how we exited liminality, changed by our passage through it. He was particularly interested in rites of separation and rites of reincorporation — those things that individuals and

groups did to signal the end of liminality and the beginning of a new steady state. I would argue that we were plunged into this liminal moment quite suddenly, but how might we deliberately and thoughtfully structure our exit/s? How will we exit this/these liminal moments — perhaps more than once? What are the rites/rituals we will need to do — individually? Collectively? As a community? Society?

Beginning again: looking forward

“Life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and to rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way” (Van Gennep, 1960).

One of the reasons to approach the analysis of the pandemic from this social-centric point of view is to provide an opportunity to think about the opportunities as we exit the pandemic to (re)stabilise ourselves, our communities, and our country in new and different ways. Thus far, Australia has been fortunate in the global context of the pandemic, and our focus is shifting towards post-COVID recovery. While acknowledging that the pandemic is still at large, we are already beginning to consider and plan for a post-COVID Australia. How might we do that and what will the roles for technology be in all of this? If things have been destabilised and shaken up, would we want to stabilise them? And if so, how?

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