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Research Project #2

A time of radical change and radical empathy: Daily life and public perception during COVID-19

In the last two months, we have seen a shift in the conduction of daily life unlike anything the modern world has ever seen. The outbreak of COVID-19 has touched nearly every person in nearly every country, impacting daily life, modes of communication, public interactions, and the future of social welfare in America. This virus has shown the cracks in the foundation of western society as impoverished populations are ignored and people are denied access to basic necessities. The spread of fear is arguably more infectious and detrimental than the virus itself and this paper explores the social and cultural implications of social distancing and the nature of discourse about COVID-19 for myself and the larger global community.

Changes to daily routine

In March the announcements came of school moving to online education for the remainder of the semester, then came the hoarding of essential goods such as toilet paper, then the media reporting record breaking death tolls of the elderly, then the isolation, all the while maintaining the fundamental undertone of fear. And where are we? What are we doing about this? Exactly what we've been advised to do, staying home and avoiding any non-essential

outings. But what's essential? For me, my ability to function on a day-to-day basis depends on scheduling and consistency. A daily schedule for me is one where I wake up, go to class, see my friends, and maybe grab a bite to eat somewhere on campus on my way home to do my assignments. It's not much but it's structured and it keeps me on track and able to accomplish my daily tasks. With the outbreak of COVID-19 there is no structure. This situation is entirely unique and the urgent pleas from government officials and healthcare agencies for people to remain inside is illustrative that millions of Americans are facing the same issue that I am. We are such an on-the-go society that the thought of having no plans for the day other than accomplishing tasks at your own pace is virtually unrealistic and unthought of for many people.

I would like to think that I am able to be at peace in my own presence for extended periods of time, but in attempt to stay safe by staying in my home the majority of my day, I'm realizing more about my nature as a human and how I take for granted things that I do on a daily basis. Socializing and small talk, for example. With most of America being quarantined and travel restricted, we have taken to technology to conduct our daily life including working and socializing. For me, not seeing as many people on a daily basis has made me use my phone a lot more, I am texting and scrolling through social media more than I normally would have. Without the time allocated for socializing on campus and engaging in impromptu interactions, I have been observing online presences and been able to think of my responses before I hit send. This has led me to feel uncomfortable in group settings even in the short amount of time that we have been quarantined. I notice myself not confident in my ability to actively participate in conversation in settings more than two or three people because for the past month I have been communicating virtually, having the ability to portray a certain image of myself that provides a

sense of comfortability. I predict this trend will only continue and intensify and after this pandemic is over and we are able to resume interacting, social interactions will remain mostly centered around virtual communication.

A “limited” social sphere

When I do see people, our conversations are centered around COVID-19 and the fear sparked because of it. I’ve heard nearly every person I’ve come in contact with for the past month say “you can be a carrier and not even know it... we all probably have it... this is probably just a government tool for population control... “. People are scared and it is evident. We are seeing people die and we are seeing all businesses and conduct like usual come to an immediate halt, people are walking around in masks and we’ve been told that we cannot be within 6 feet of another person; it is understandable that people are comparing this to the apocalypse, there’s no one on the streets and we haven’t seen anyone but our families in person for weeks.

This time is a balance between satisfying my need for public interaction and recognizing the severity of this situation, coupled with my fear of contracting it and spreading it to an immunal-compromised person. For this reason I have decided to participate in the practice of social distancing and have dramatically limited the amount of people I am in contact with. Everyday I am solitary and everyday I am indoors. Everyone is indoors, but they are not silent. With the outbreak of COVID-19 has come an influx in national pride and cultural practices to procure a sense of togetherness and hope. In Italy people have taken to singing on their balconies, a great example of community and national solidarity, bringing together complete

strangers coming from completely diverse backgrounds, all connected by their shared fear and experience.

Public interactions and general attitudes

Breaking news, the Coronavirus has entered the United States with the first reported case. Breaking news, the United States now has over 400 confirmed cases of the Coronavirus. Breaking news, breaking news, breaking news. That's all everyone is talking about now, about how there's a suspected case from someone who went to their yoga studio, or their children's school. This level of fear is driven by the mass media employing a never-ending string of "now this" news about COVID-19 that leaves people with nothing else to talk about. Not to say that the fear isn't understandable, we have seen our country virtually come to a halt and the only news we're being told is that higher-ups are working on solutions and we should stay inside until the adults figure out what to do. People are mad, and they're confused and lonely. However, this virus has brought people together as we all now have a common conversation topic. It has also outed racists and the level of bigotry associated with xenophobic attitudes to this situation.

People are showing a radical empathy unlike anything I have ever witnessed but it is incredibly fascinating because at the same time, the selfish roots of western society are being exposed in ways such as mass hoarding of essential goods. COVID-19 is being weaponized by the mass media by inducing fear in the general public, leading them to over-consume due to the fear of resource depletion, acting against underprivileged groups who rely on buying substances as needed and cannot afford to mass-buy.

A time of political uncertainty

Something I find particularly interesting about the social attitudes and conversations that I've observed regarding COVID-19 is that the historically ground-breaking presidential election has been put on hold and is no longer the focus of everyone's attention. I regularly consume more than 3 different news outlets (CNN, New York Times, and The Washington Post) and from my observations, all political discourse has shifted away from the politicians themselves and focused on what already established organizations and governmental agencies are doing to stop the spread of the virus. In my opinion, the 2020 election is the most historically fascinating in the entirety of our republic. We are in a time of extreme social and cultural transition as individual, inclusive rights are the forefront of most political discourse and controversy. From electing our first president of color in 2008 to having more than 10 women on the primary ballot in the past two elections, it is clear that social progression is transforming the way politics are conducted, opening up to include a face that is representative of the people it represents.

Moving forward I predict we will see more pressure put on politicians to invest government funds into continuations of social welfare programs received during this time of national emergency, like the implementation of a universal basic income. Especially with predictions of an economic crisis approaching very quickly, a universal basic income is the only feasible response to protect the nation's citizens and hyper-capitalistic market system. I predict that we will also see an upsurge in empathy and community solidarity as we will all know someone who has been touched by this virus and its adverse effects on social, cultural, and economic life.