

The Worst Case Scenario after Covid

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis offers each of us the opportunity to extend our thinking beyond the norm [1]. Scenario planning is a well-established technique by which we can think about different futures. The construction of scenarios is an excellent process which encourages people to think in different terms about their future, or that of the organisation for which they work.

The current situation with the COVID-19 virus serves as a reminder that we have not taken future-planning seriously. We rarely allow ourselves to really think about the worst-case scenario. The COVID-19 virus is a classic worst-case scenario, and getting worse. Pandemic viruses such as this have long been known to exist, as evidenced by the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) virus which so badly affected Hong Kong in 2003. However, most people working through scenario planning processes still fail to seriously engage with the worst-case scenarios formed in their planning processes, probably because such futures seem so far out there. They may be expressed but not really engaged with. Exceptions to this general reluctance are the human and animal health experts who regularly role-play how to manage a pandemic should one arise, albeit Australia has not run a large-scale national pandemic exercise since 2008 [2] and two years ago the President of the United States disbanded the White House Pandemic Planning Team because it was thought that this eventuality would never happen [3]. Now the worst has happened and that country appears under-prepared.

A confidential report prepared for the Australian Department of Defence in 2018 sought to predict the unpredictable [4]. This study looked at three main scenarios. Firstly, the impact of climate change and resulting natural disasters. Secondly, the impact of global conflict between large national states. Thirdly, the effects of a pandemic. The impact of each of these scenarios was examined as to the disrupted effects on global supply chains for materials, medicines, chemicals and of course food. The reliance currently on just-in-time as opposed to just-in-case logistic strategies highlighted large areas of concern with any of the scenarios mentioned above. These logistic strategies of course impact on most industries including library and information services. While it is partially true that much of published information at present is available in digital form, it is also true that it is only available to those authorised to access the rich resources of the major library collections across the country. This is relatively a very small cohort of people. In addition, the access to this digital data is totally dependent on reliable access to servers and back-up servers located in this country. All libraries across the globe have been closed during the COVID-19 crisis.

Scenario planning has been used since the Second World War to explore the variety of options open to individuals and organisations as they plan their future. One paper sought to explore the likely impact of MOOCs on the future of Universities, exploring the disruption impacts of this new technology [5]. Where this paper explores the normal three-scenario approach to an emerging technology (best-case scenario, most likely scenario and worst-case scenario), the situation we now find ourselves in lends itself mostly to the worst-case scenario.

Cass Sunstein wrote a book on *Worst-Case Scenarios* (Harvard University Press, 2007). In this he highlights the reversal of thinking, after the catastrophe that was 9/11. The US Government changed the level of risk required for an issue to be kept on the active focus from medium to even very low risk issues. They moved to thinking that if an event or action was predicted to have only a 1% chance of happening, then it should be included in their active contingency planning. To say the least, this turned their approach to planning on its head. It also created a huge climate of distrust and uncertainty.



Sunstein has described the COVID-19 pandemic as one of “probability neglect” [6]. He is saying that we have neglected the worst-case scenario by thinking that it was of such low probability that it did not warrant any serious attention.

It is clear, in his view, that a “Catastrophic Precautionary Principle. . . calls for close attention to both the magnitude and the probability of harm and hence to expected value” [7]. This principle certainly does not seem to have been applied to this pandemic at least in some countries. Probability needs to be considered alongside risk and the resulting certainty or uncertainty but these factors need to be considered.

When the worst-case scenario happens then a whole range of other unforeseen events can and most likely will take place; the way in which systems have operated will change very, very quickly. People will re-assess their world and accept change that they may have previously been resistant to. Hard and sometimes harsh change can then occur to processes and institutions previously completely oblivious to the need for change. The need for such system re-evaluation will occur quickly and definitively. Without preparation – change will sweep all before it. In the case of this pandemic, nothing is likely to be the same as before. A crisis of this magnitude can be an opportunity for positive, permanent change.

Publishing and libraries, already in the clutches of change, could see further exponential leaps across the barriers to change as well. Both of these industries have been under pressure to change delivery models and have been subject to downsizing. Much of the world’s English language literatures are now being delivered digitally. Publishing has already been impacted by Open Access, while libraries in different sectors have innovated and modified in different ways to their changing roles. Open Access remains an unresolved issue burdened by the various measures of individual and institutional ratings of performance. Newspaper publishing is still locked in revenue and rights battles with Internet companies such as Google and Facebook as to the use of the publisher content and IP. Newspapers are ceasing publication in many rural and small cities with the current crisis only accelerating their demise [8]. The disruption to the financial and publishing models threatens the very viability of current affairs news reporting and academic publishing. Clayton Christenson has been a major international researcher helping us to understand the power which the disruptive influences of various technologies, have on our services and major institutions. He has helped us understand how digital has disrupted so many services which were previously established in the print milieu [9]. Google has been clearly a major disruptor in so many businesses and industries. Its influence is neither good nor bad but nothing is the same any longer. Newspapers are struggling to survive as readers abandon the print while the revenues are quickly evaporating into the platforms such as Google and Facebook.

The education and training sectors have moved, at alarming speed in this current crisis, onto the Internet with online learning platforms such as Blackboard, Moodle and Edmodo. Mostly they were not ready for this very different mode of pedagogy. Nor were libraries and parents and teachers. The status and importance of publishers, librarians and educators have been impacted strongly. There has already been much discussion about this change and the impact on both teachers and students. It can be very unfamiliar to these cohorts, with the parents struggling in the background. We are all having to live through these tumultuous times. Libraries are essential partners with publishers and vice versa. Both are undergoing massive change and both will be changed as the other alters its tools of trade and business model.

Bill Gates has said we are “in uncharted territory” due to a lack of investment and preparation for such a pandemic. Few countries, he says, would receive an A-Grade rating [10]. He is talking about preparedness for this pandemic. Gates predicted some five years ago, that a situation such as a pandemic could create systemic change.

Our reluctance to seriously acknowledge that worst-case scenarios exist is a real failure in our approach to the future. Change in this sense is about doing things differently and not expecting that our world will look a certain way and that we can continue to live our daily

lives the way we have been used to. The worst-case scenarios, which we are beginning to grasp as real, will force us all to confront change in a much more fundamental way. This change will be super-charged. In fact it will not be change, but an entirely different way of seeing the world, of doing work and of relating to others. The highly respected Thomas Malone wrote, in 2004, a book on the Future of work [11]. He talked about the coming impact of decentralisation and the need to move away from “command and control” drivers focussing on our need to choose and “to help create a world that is not just richer, but better” [12]. Most of this decentralisation has already occurred locally and globally. “Globalisation” is another term used to describe this phenomenon. The application of the “working from home” practice is accelerating change but to which destination is still unclear. Ironically, much of that potential to choose is being dissipated not by our actions or those of our professions but by immutable external forces. We do not have frameworks in which to understand what is happening and to plan. The same rules that currently govern our previously “ordered” world may simply no longer be there. We will not have the leisure to contemplate this choice or that; many people will not recognise the new world in which they must live and work.

If we believe that we will “come out the other side” of the lockdown to our old lives, then we are seriously underestimating the fundamental impact of this time for the world’s population [13]. We will not be returning to the same modes by which our lives have operated. Indeed, schools, universities and libraries will not return to the familiar. There are many prognostications about the loss of jobs but it is the nature of work as well as the support for institutions which will challenge us massively.

The temptation to extend the logic of change already applied in the publishing and library worlds will be great, but the change will inexorably go further, eliminating structures and processes with which we are currently familiar.

All public and academic libraries are currently closed to public access during the COVID-19 crisis, apart from their online presences. All institutions, public and private, coming out of the lockdown will be strongly and immediately assessing their economic viability while looking for any means to reduce the pressure on the balance sheet and maintain some health in the cash flow. It is surmised that not all will survive the lockdown. There are numerous press stories to this effect. Hard decisions as well as opportunistic ones will be made. The easily made decisions will be fraught and vulnerable. Opportunities will also exist, however.

A number of factors will be at play in the post-epidemic world. Primary amongst these will be uncertainty. The new high levels of unemployment will induce a great amount of uncertainty as to who and how many will be re-employed, or whether even more staff members may be sacrificed. The factor of uncertainty also applies to industry sectors.

Another key factor will be risk. There will no doubt be many familiar guideposts in the new environment but decision-making will be fraught with risk. All of the customary budget and operational guidelines will be fractured, unstable and ever changing. Singapore’s long standing Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has recently indicated that lasting structural changes to its service-oriented economy will be evident in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic. “Significant structural changes to our economy are likely. Some industries will be disrupted permanently. Companies will have to change their business models to survive. Some jobs will simply disappear...Workers in these industries will have to re-skill themselves, to take up jobs in new sectors” [14].

Scenario planning, futures thinking and other complimentary tools are being recommended by respected bodies such as the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and other authors such as Cascio [15]. “... the tremendous uncertainty about what lies ahead can cripple business leaders’ ability to take strategic action.” They go to say that there are so many questions “of paramount importance to the business environment, but they are largely unknown—rendering forecasts essentially impossible” [16]. The BCG, for instance, advocate the construction of regularly updated scenarios. In the library context, a notable scenario

project was carried out under the auspices of the State Library of New South Wales (NSW). It was called Bookends [17]. In this, four scenarios were constructed to describe potential environments which public libraries in New South Wales could find themselves before 2030. The time horizon was really excessive but the content was thoughtful.

Scenarios should not, especially now, be one-off exercises but should be actively tested in an on-going response to the developing environment. Scenarios are, however, a wonderful path to the reinvention, the re-imagination of the future. This can be aligned with an active data collection of that which is happening in the environment of the library, information service or publisher market. The very recent thought provoking book by John Kay and Mervyn King entitled *Radical Uncertainty: decision-making for an unknowable future* [18] feeds into this same message. Risk and uncertainty should be happy companions along future journeys. They certainly over-ride the probability of no change!

The re-assessments, and without doubt, re-structurings, will introduce new anxieties while reinforcing old emotions. Little movement of old positions or outlooks will not be a good sign. Leadership with a determined and “over-the-horizon” vision will be sought and rewarded even though not always appreciated. Evidence of and the engagement of all players will be interwoven into collaborative behaviours as we all seek new and improved ways to not only endure but also prosper.

We cannot assume that the world will be the same. Dust may have settled on our operations, but coming out of the COVID-19 lockdown nothing can or should be taken for granted. All of this is in the realm of worst-case scenarios. If you do not choose your future, it will be chosen for you!

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Notes

1. Author of re-imagining your library's future: scenario planning for libraries and information services. With Peter Sidorko. Oxford, Chandos, 2008.
2. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-20/coronavirus-australia-ran-its-last-pandemic-exercise-in-2008/12157916>.
3. The Global Health Security and Biodefense unit, responsible for pandemic preparedness, was established in 2015 by Barack Obama's National Security Advisor, Susan Rice. The unit resided under the National Security Council (NSC), a forum of White House personnel that advises the president on national security and foreign policy matters. In May 2018, the team was disbanded.
4. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-29/military-leaders-warn-australia-prepare-for-worse-coronavirus/12193228>.
5. Stockport, G.J., Klobas, J. and Mackintosh, B. (2012) *Beyond the Rhetoric: Planning for the Future University*. In: IADIS International Conference on International Higher Education 2012, 28 - 30 November 2012, Perth, Australia.
6. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-02-28/coronavirus-panic-caused-by-probability-neglect> As accessed 6 April 2020.
7. Cass Sunstein Worst-case scenarios. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007: 279.
8. <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/news-corp-suspends-print-editions-of-community-newspapers-20200401-p54fxv.html>. As accessed 8 May 2020.
9. Christenson's seminal book *The Innovator's Dilemma* is essential in developing our understanding of why risk and uncertainty have disrupted our understanding of steady-as-you-go approaches to planning and management. Indeed the concept of disruption has been accepted as a major understanding of how technologies radically change businesses.

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10. As reported on BBC website 12 April, 2020.
 11. Thomas W. Malone. *The Future of work*. Boston, Harvard Business School Press, 2004.
 12. Op cit: 13.
 13. As accessed 7 May 2020: <https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/a-recession-of-historic-proportions-europe-s-economic-hit-will-be-long-lasting-20200506-p54qj6.html>.
 14. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3082367/jobs-will-disappear-coronavirus-speeds-digital-disruption>. As accessed 1 May 2020.
 15. <https://www.fastcompany.com/1362037/futures-thinking-basics>. As accessed 7 May 2020.
 16. <https://www.bcg.com/en-gb/publications/2020/win-covid-19-battle-with-scenarios.aspx>. 1. As accessed 7 May 2020.
 17. http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/bookends_scenarios.pdf. As accessed 7 May 2020.
 18. John Kay and Mervyn King *Radical Uncertainty*. London, Bridge Street Press, 2020.