Julia LeMonde

"What is your favourite coronavirus conspiracy theory?"

Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia, 02 March – 31 March 2020

At the time of this diary I was a PhD candidate and sociology tutor at the University of Queensland (UQ), Australia. This diary is a snapshot of my life experience during the month of March, following the announcement of a global coronavirus pandemic. I was living on Queensland's Sunshine Coast with my partner and two youngest children aged 16 and 14 at the time.

This diary includes quotes on risk theory and Foucauldian governmentality perspectives because these concepts guided my interpretation of events during my lived experience of coping under a regime of intensified authority. News headlines from a national television news program known as The Project (https://10play.com.au/theproject) and the on-line news platform Australian Broadcasting Corporation News (ABC News) (https://www.abc.net.au/news/) are also included because they provided context and helped me to understand what I was experiencing in my community.

Monday 2 March 2020.

> "'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements." (Michel Foucault, cf. Gordon, C. 1980. *Power/knowledge*. New York: Pantheon, 133)
>
> HEADLINE: "Tonight: Australia's first human to human coronavirus

> infections: are travel bans enough to prevent an outbreak?" (*The Project*, Monday 02 March 2020)

Fear escalates. The previous few weeks have seen an intensification of news reports of a dangerous and deadly virus infecting thousands of people, originating from a Chinese province and spreading throughout the world. Mainstream media is warning of a threat of catching and dying from the virus, and is predominantly focusing on the threat potentially posed by people returning to Australia with the virus. Today I first became aware of the impact of these events at my local Toastmasters meeting where I meet with a group of roughly twelve to twenty adults fortnightly to practice public speaking. We follow the protocols outlined in International Toastmasters, which is an organisation dedicated to improving public speaking skills in its members. There is always a 'Table Topics' segment where a member introduces a topic and other members are invited to speak for up to three minutes impromptu as instructed by the Table Topics presenter. The topic tonight was conspiracy theories and "What is your favourite coronavirus conspiracy theory?" This was obviously on everyone's mind now and the "conspiracies" were discussed in a jovial manner. What surprised me most, however, was the decision of one of our members to interrupt the meeting just as we were resuming from our supper break, to instruct us in the process of washing our hands. This seemed strange to me, and although the member was a retired nurse, I wondered what compelled her to initiate a hand washing lecture- was it her own anxiety about catching a disease I wondered? After this I witnessed another member repeatedly spray his hands with hand sanitizer for the remainder of the meeting, a situation I found incredibly interesting because he hadn't moved or used his hands, yet sprayed several times whilst still sitting in his chair. I went home curious as to the behaviours of my group and to ponder on the sense of anxiety that had somehow infiltrated our meeting tonight.

Tuesday 03 March 2020

HEADLINE: “Tonight: as infection rates grow, we look at the radical laws that the government could enforce in a bid to contain coronavirus.” (*The Project*, Tuesday 03 March 2020)

Wednesday 04 March 2020

HEADLINE: “Tonight: the toilet paper panic buying hits overdrive as Aussies across the country lose it over loo role.” (*The Project*, Wednesday 04 March 2020)

Thursday 05 March 2020

“This book argues that panic is out of place. Thoughtful public discussion of the iatrogenic pandemic beginning with an insistence upon demystification of all medical matters, will not be dangerous to the commonweal. Indeed, what is dangerous is a passive public that has come to rely on superficial medical housecleanings.” (Ivan Illich 1976. *Medical Nemesis*. New York: Pantheon, pxii)

HEADLINE: “Tonight: in the coronavirus panic our frontline doctors are running low on masks, what’s happening with the government stockpile?” (*The Project*, Thursday 05 March 2020)



Figure 1: University warnings first appear

Transformation of public spaces. Media statements are circulating regularly about shortages and panic. Hygiene and hand washing are also becoming hot topics. Today a university COVID-19 update appears in my email telling us all that it is business as usual but to observe hygienic practices such as hand washing and to stay home if feeling unwell. Several public notices have appeared around the university explaining hygiene measures. The message seems to be that we are all capable of spreading this hidden disease, no matter how healthy we may feel. Otherwise it is business as usual.

Friday 06 March 2020.

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: Australian coronavirus cases multiply as officials warn the worst is yet to come." (*The Project*, Friday 06 March, 2020)

Unpredictability reigns. Amid dire health warnings which are streaming hourly on all broadcast media platforms, I drive to the university and successfully deliver my sociology tutorials. Many interested students contributed to the discussions and I am enjoying my new role as a tutor which complements being a PhD student. As the days go by I find there is an increase in 'COVID-19' updates in my email box from the head of school; reports that students can't come to class, that some are stuck in China, that travel policies around field work are changing as borders are closing. Things seem to be moving at a dramatic pace as each day more changes are announced at university. I tune in to mainstream news and there is much talk mainly in terms of fear of the unknown virus which has to capacity to kill large numbers of people. There is a lack of circumstantial evidence of pandemic disease in my community and I consider this in the context of risks and probability, and begin to wonder who exactly in Australia is dying from this disease. On another note a news report goes viral about people fighting in shopping centres over toilet paper. This seems counter-intuitive to me to be reporting this as now surely a surge in stockpiling is imminent as people hear this?

Monday 09 March 2020

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: the number of confirmed cases is growing so would shutting down schools help contain coronavirus?" (*The Project*, Monday, 09 March 2020)

Tuesday 10 March 2020

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: concerts and festival postponed, and sporting events cancelled." (*The Project*, Tuesday, 10 March 2020)



Figure 2: Toilet paper stripped from grocery shelves

Panic buying. As more statements are broadcast detailing stoppages and panic around confirmed cases of coronavirus I venture out to the shops for groceries. For

the first time I see an empty toilet paper aisle at my local supermarket. I take a photo and put in on Facebook, saying: “thanks to the media panic and all the idiots doubling up on toilet paper.” This post stimulated a social media conversation with my friends locally, in other Australian states and overseas. A friend in another state wrote that she hasn’t seen toilet paper in her local shop for over a week now whilst another complained of having tried eight different shops looking for toilet paper. One post reply said she has a two can limit on everything except tuna. Rations include one lentil bag, one chickpea bag, and one bag of frozen vegetables. Others come forward and talk about all the rationing of food that is occurring in their local shopping centres. A friend in America commented that their food shortages are similar, one friend in England posted that it was not that bad there yet. This got me thinking about what types of food become important in a crisis. I found out that all the tinned fish is made in Taiwan and this makes it dangerous in the public perception, hence the stocked aisle of tinned fish. I had heard that Chinese food restaurants were struggling to stay open as people have been avoiding eating anything Chinese now. Upon reflection on all the panic buying I asked myself, are people just “idiots?” It might be more about how people are being manipulated by the media to feel very afraid and these behaviours are demonstrating their sense of powerlessness and fear of shortage. If governmentality consciousness operates at the level of the consciousness of the people, then I decide I must practice the cultural relativism I am trying to impart to my students in my class. The media has many people in panic mode and the buying of toilet paper is one thing the masses can all control right now, it must give them a sense of peace, or preparation, but for what I wonder? No-one I know even has a slight sniffle or mild cold and this panic seems so disproportionate to the actual lived experience of disease. Nothing else but stockpiling groceries seems controllable now in this changing world. I wonder what it must have been like for my grandparents during the Depression when rationing was the ‘norm.’

Wednesday 11 March 2020

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: the PM's 2.4-billion-dollar plan to tackle coronavirus." (*The Project*, Wednesday 11 March 2020)

Thursday 12 March 2020

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: the government's plan to send millions of Aussies a cash payment in a desperate bid to save the economy." (*The Project*, Thursday 12 March 2020)

Friday 13 March 2020

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: coronavirus makes a grand mess of the grand prix, what other events are on the chopping block?" (*The Project*, Friday 13 March 2020)

Fear escalates. Headlines continue broadcasting strategies to tackle the threat of coronavirus (COVID-19) and news of shortages and stoppages are occurring at a rapid pace. Multiple COVID -19 email updates are arriving throughout the day from the university and from my children's school notifying me of the rapid changes. The emails are overwhelming, and I feel a heightened sense of anxiety every time I open my computer. There is a pervasive sense that all normal activities are going to be shut down. The fear of catching the 'virus' is highlighted to me when I arrive at my university and a student informs me, she can no longer come to class because she fears her immune system will not withstand the virus. I feel absolutely confused as to how quickly this fear pandemic has happened and then I remember that many people listen to the headlines and follow news programs and there is not much else

on the news but projections of fear, panic and shortages. It is a very strange feeling to have no immediate experience of anyone in my community having caught this mystery virus that is reportedly killing thousands everywhere else. What is obvious is that fear *is* spreading throughout my community like a contagious virus.

Monday 16 March 2020

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: what needs to be done right now to protect the elderly and the vulnerable from coronavirus." (*The Project*, Monday 16 March 2020)

The masses respond. As the government advice broadcasts fears the virus will infiltrate the country's aged care facilities, quarantine measures begin to look imminent. The university is now pulling all travel arrangements, advising students to cancel or defer plans. New travel quarantine advice is being transmitted by the university and events are moving rapidly. I feel nothing can be planned too far in advance as each day seems to be evolving with new restrictions and legislations. I have never felt so confused and unsure. It feels as if a rug is being pulled from under me, as nothing is certain anymore.

As I prepare to go to my regular toastmasters meeting, I receive an email advising that the group is to discuss purchase of hand sanitizer, the practice of no-touch greetings, social distancing measures and on-line face-to-face meeting attendance. I immediately postpone my meeting commitments, as I am unsure of being able to practice new social regulations that are being asked of us, preferring to stay instead with my close friends and family. I feel angry and disappointed at what seems to be a growing hysteria building up about catching what for most appear to be mild cold symptoms, if anything is to be believed in the media these days. Reports of illness seem to be in the elderly who are often already suffering with other medical issues. If

I were over seventy with immune issues any virus would be a potential threat, and I am more concerned that the government is pathologizing healthy adults. I recall reading somewhere that the definition of tyranny is to control the movements of healthy people. I decide to stay away from these 'social distancing' behaviours for my own sense of health and wellbeing. As I am not able to accept or condone mainstream behaviour right now, I feel extremely socially isolated right now.

Tuesday 17 March 2020

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: what Australia's shortage of coronavirus testing kits means for you." (*The Project*, Tuesday 17 March 2020)

Wednesday 18 March 2020

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: Aussies abroad urged to come home now; indoor gatherings of more than 100 people banned." (*The Project*, Wednesday 18 March 2020)

Thursday 19 March 2020

> "We need to see how these mechanisms of power, at a given moment, in a precise conjecture and by means of a certain number of transformations, have begun to become economically advantageous and politically useful." (Gordon, C. 1980. *Power/knowledge*. New York: Pantheon, 101)
>
> HEADLINE: "Tonight: Australia closed: the PM moves to shut down

foreign arrivals." (*The Project*, Thursday 19 March 2020)

Queues and conversations. Amidst widespread streaming of panic, quarantine and daily regulations which are restricting our behaviour, I've decided it is finally time to purchase toilet paper. I arrive at the supermarket at 7.30 a.m. to discover there are new regulations; the store is only open for people with welfare/pension cards so I must wait till 8 a.m. to gain entry.



Figure 3: Queueing for toilet paper and chatting with strangers

I stand in the queue outside for the 8am entry and start chatting and laughing with others in the queue about how the 'queuing requirement' is strange given we are hearing about social distancing rules, but we are compelled to line up behind each other, with the queue now extending around the corner. We start chatting about the situation and one man shares with me that he feels he has not always been

interested in conspiracy ideas but lately has started to wonder about our government. We exchange our observations about some of the anomalies and 'slippery rules' around the virus, my interlocutor mentioning that our prime minister did not go into quarantine after being in contact with the home affairs minister who reportedly has coronavirus. I recounted how my friend just went to get on a cruise to go to Cairns (northern Queensland) and they told all the passengers that due to coronavirus fears they would not be going, *but* let them all on together to have a meal, eat, dance and enjoy the cruise for one night. This logic does not make sense if there is a risk of pandemic proportions circulating in the community. The man I am chatting with suggests it's often more about money than health, then confides how worried he is about the way the news is worrying his elderly mother and that this stress can make one's body more susceptible to disease. I note that the virus seems to be attacking the elderly and he discloses that he thinks it might be a plan to rid the country of the elderly. I comment that we are a country with an ageing population and when you look at it that way this could present a solution to a real economic concern government might be having. This is where we are both starting to 'fire' up our suspicions about the government and then we are interrupted by staff who tell us we can now enter the store. We both decide we can't 'solve the world' any longer, we have toilet paper to buy. We bid goodbye and the man yells out 'focus' and we laugh and carry on with our important business of the day- buying rationed toilet paper. I meet another man inside at the only fully stocked aisle which is full of tinned fish who proudly shows me how prepared he is, pointing to his sanitised towels on his trolley for his hands to touch. I walk the aisles looking at the other near-empty shelves, my newly acquired toilet paper package in my hand. Within ten minutes the toilet paper aisle had been stripped of stock. I meet someone I know looking for what meat was available for pies she makes and sells at our local markets. She tells me that vegetarian pies will be her theme this week as she cannot get hold of enough meat to make her pies. Everyone seems to be talking about the problem of goods as I make my way through a very busy hour of shopping.



Figure 4: On my arrival at the toilet paper aisle & Figure 5: Self and toilet paper victory

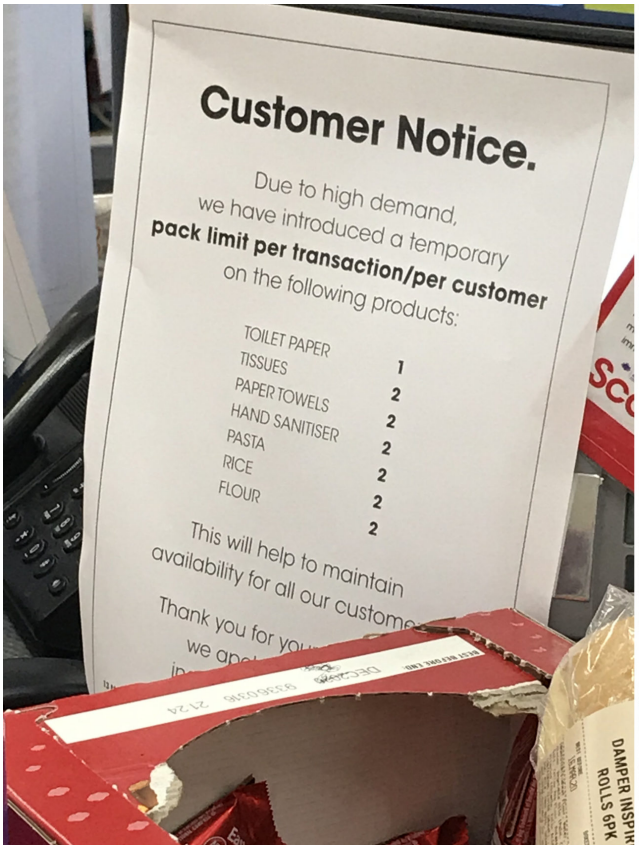




Figure 6: My first glimpse of ration signs & Figure 7: The rice section

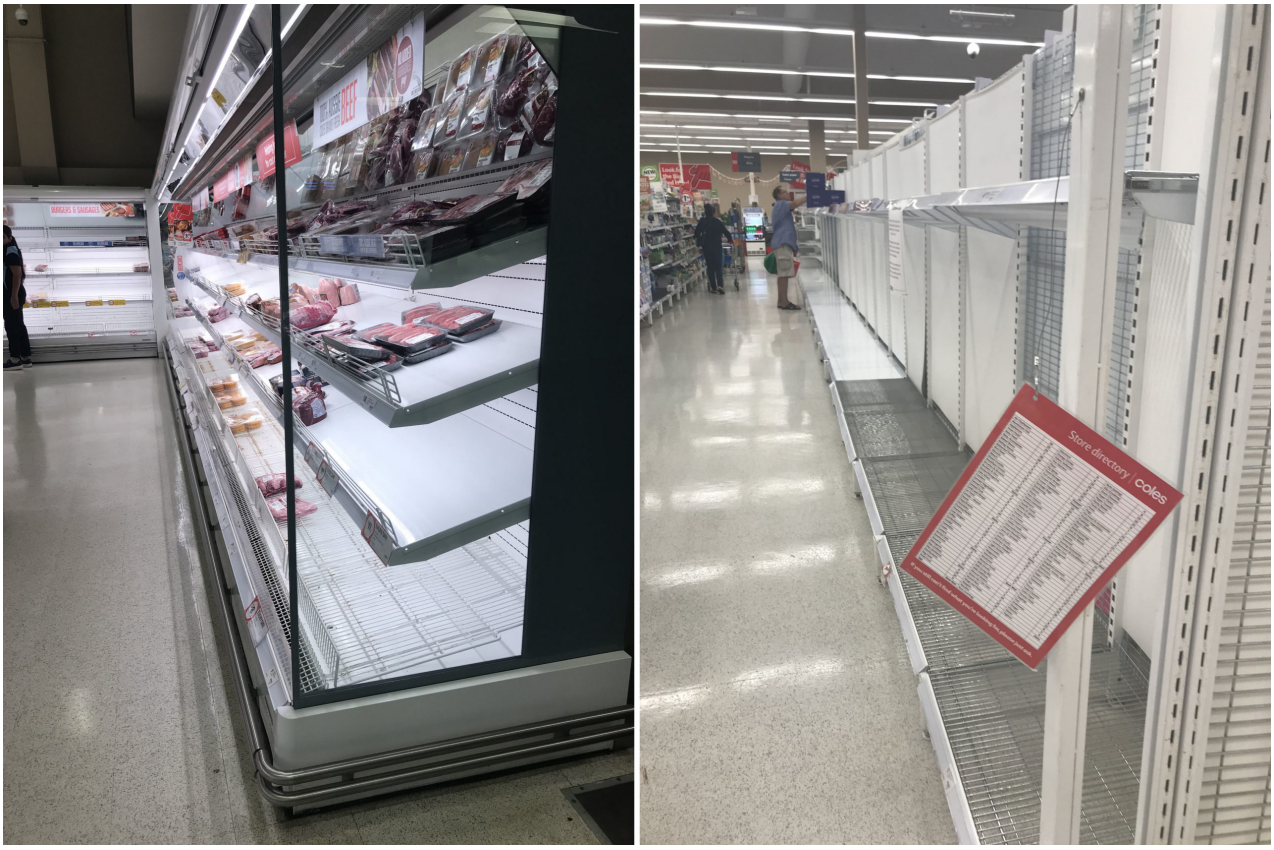


Figure 8: The meat aisle & Figure 9: Toilet paper aisle ten minutes later

Friday 20 March 2020

> "Let us not, therefore, ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy. Let us ask, instead, how things work at the level of on-going subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours etc." (Foucault, M. 1980. *Power/knowledge*. New York: Pantheon, 97)

HEADLINE: Tonight: one person per 4 square metres: the tough new measures to slow the spread of coronavirus. (*The Project*, Friday 20

March 2020)

Fractured relationships and making human contact. More restrictions are broadcast and there is talk of imminent school closures in Queensland. Today I have had enough of the hysteria, and I organise three girlfriends to join me at our local pub (hotel) for dinner. I have already had a meltdown during the week having felt like I was a walking disease by my butcher who wanted to sell me meat but didn't want me to touch the counter, and told me she would have to sanitise after I paid her by my bankcard. An extended family member (who lives in another state) had rung me with anxiety about catching this mystery virus at which point I became so rude, yelling at her that I was not buying into her hysteria. Some of my relationships with others are disintegrating. One of my friends rang to say that they were now talking social distancing at public venues and might I book the table as public places could only have 25 people in a 100 square metre place. I rang the pub and asked was there any problem and was told, "Nah, they won't be able to police that, we're open to everyone still." My friends and I enjoyed our meal and connection together that night. It was good to sit with the few likeminded people I knew.

Saturday 21 March 2020



Figure 11: Market stall stripped bare of edible plants following panic buying

Government reach and panic buying. A text message from one of my friends who had joined me for dinner the night before stated: "Yandina pub closed at 5pm today" It is a Saturday night and I wonder was Friday night our last meal out for a while? I find out later the pub was heavily fined for not practicing social distancing on that Friday night. Later in the morning I visit my local farmers' markets to buy some more seedlings, particularly chilly plants as mine all drowned in all this rain we have been having. My local market stall man who sells all manner of plant seedlings, was sitting down looking dishevelled and dumbstruck. I jokingly asked, "is this how the stall looks when you come late?" as I normally visit his stall around 6.30am. He said this was highly unusual to be sold out and told me how people were lining up at dawn in the dark, and he couldn't see the customers properly as he was still setting up, but

everyone was in a panic to buy up all his seedlings- something he has never experienced before. I know he has serious health issues and he told me he was worried about touching everyone's money and all the people traipsing through his stall, so might not come next week. He confided that he doesn't think the markets should be open even because although it is essential food stalls mainly here, he worries about the threat of the virus. I asked him was he feeling stressed and he said no, mainly angry and then started to tell me of all the biohazard mistakes that he knew of such as the recent cruise ship that let infected customers off the boat and into cabs and trains and public transport and how our leaders are so incompetent. He also warned me that there will be no monetary value by June as we are all in a financial mess and our money will be worthless. He told me that when the monarchical ruling elite gave the power to the banks centuries ago, they were supposed to keep 10% in gold but now they just keep making money and it will be a disaster. I let him speak until he was calmer and went home wondering about these strange experiences I am having with members of my community.

Sunday 22 March 2020

> "Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk has announced a $17 million package to fast-track a coronavirus vaccine developed in the state." (22 March 2020: Coronavirus vaccine funding announcement as number of Queensland COVID-19 cases rise. *ABC News*. Retrieved from https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-22/coronavirus-vaccine-funding-university-queensland-cases/12079184)

> "A major crackdown on gatherings will see the closure of indoor venues, including pubs, clubs, sporting and religious venues from midday today in response to the coronavirus pandemic." (Worthington, March 2020: Coronavirus crackdown to force mass closures of pubs, clubs, churches

> and indoor sporting venues. *ABC News* Retrieved from https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-22/major-coronavirus-crackdown-to-close-churches-pubs-clubs/12079610)

Monday 23 March 2020

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: Australia's been transformed, [for many young and old 2020 will be the toughest year of our lives-PM Scott Morrison], will this decisive shutdown flatten the curve?" (*The Project*, Monday 23 March 2020)

Lockdowns begin. Today the government begins military-style lock downs. From midday all pubs, clubs, cafes, gyms, indoor sports centres, casinos, cinemas and places of worship are to be closed. The government welfare department of Centrelink begins to be overwhelmed with queues outside to claim welfare as the country braces for mass unemployment. I wonder about my friends and family and some have already been laid off such as my daughter who is in hospitality. I go shopping for more supplies and am told by another shopper that the police are down at a local beach telling everyone it will be on the spot fines if they do not carry out social distancing after midday.

Another strange thing I notice today are the furtive looks some people are giving. This social distancing policy has created a kind of endemic fear in our previously friendly society. I am conscious not to walk near anyone but usually make eye contact and smile anyway, however something has changed, you can now spot the fearful. What is going on I wonder nervously? The logic defies the panic as most of the coronavirus deaths seem to be from elderly people who already have pre-existing illnesses. Some reports on the radio repeatedly warn that for most of the population coronavirus symptoms are mild and last only a few days. Yet these small

statements are drowned out in the continual sensationalist reports that broadcast the risk of catching this virus. I am living this very situation in my society right now and increasingly risk discourse is being used as a concept to govern our movements.

Tuesday 24 March 2020

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: tens of thousands of jobless Aussies can dip into their super to get through the coronavirus crisis; but the damage to their retirement will last a lifetime." (*The Project*, Tuesday 24 March 2020)

Loss of the familiar. A quick trip out to my local bulk liquor merchants to stock up with beer and wine. I arrive and things have changed. There is now a security guard outside and a zero-tolerance warning on the window. I remember seeing these sorts of warnings in high stress areas such as when I was at a Centrelink office seeking welfare years ago, but this now seems to be the norm everywhere I go. What surprises me is the large lower limit of alcohol that is being 'rationed'- were people coming in with multiple trolleys I wonder? No matter, the limit does not affect me but I did by double cans and bottles as I too have now started to think in terms of long term isolation and so bought the remaining six bottles of my favourite organic wine plus six of another on the shelf, organic wine always being limited in supply anyway. I remember I do have a wine making book at home, maybe this is the time to think more about this, but I know it would be better to give up alcohol than add more jobs to my list. I buy a bottle of Baileys Irish Cream for good measure- winters by the fire- this might be needed. My behaviour and attitude are changing daily too.

Wednesday 25 March 2020

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: new rules and restrictions on how to live through the coronavirus crisis [this is a time of serious change-PM Scott Morrison]; but are more measures just creating more confusion?" (*The Project*, Wednesday 25 March 2020)

Anger overrides empathy. Today I set out for one of our large department stores 30 min away to buy a pasta machine as my old one wore out and I know I can make large quantities of food with it and my hen's eggs and not leave the house if need be. The woman serving me retrieves one from the back room as there are none on display, she stands a metre away and instructs me to show my loyalty card and turn it over as she is not going to touch it. I nod and realise this is the new way, then pull out some cash. No, she says her shop does not take cash. All the time I sense she is tense and sad, it is only 9am and the shops have literally just opened. I ask if everything is ok and she said she is practising distancing. I told her I understood that, but that she seemed tense. She told me she has asthma. I responded with, "why aren't you self-isolating and using holiday pay or something to stay home if you are so worried?" She answered tersely "It's a personal choice." At this point I could think of nothing nice or understanding to say to her as feelings of anger have been welling up in me when vulnerable people start pathologizing me as a threat, put themselves in the spotlight and then expecting others to alter their behaviour. What has happened to my cultural relativism, my compassion for others? This woman may have bills to pay, a family to feed, be worried out of her mind but glad she has a job and is being careful albeit in a tense manner. I smile weakly and tell her I hope she smiles a bit for her health. I don't know what she said in reply as I am retreating home to where life seems a little more normal and where I can cope a bit better than I am today. It is only mid-morning and I feel exhausted from the impact of this mystery "virus" and my emotions. Although I woke at 5.30 with a positive morning meditation it has worn off and I must get home, away from negative interactions and self-isolate from the strangers in my community for now.

Thursday 26 March 2020

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: how the rapid new test being fast tracked to Australia could be a gamechanger in the fight to stop the threat." (*The Project*, Thursday, 26 March 2020).

The outside world is confronting. My university is also converting to distance learning, and I will deliver my tutorials online. Today my two children who still live with me are home from school whilst their teachers plan for online learning. They slept in and we decided today was a 'free day' for them. Later I drive them to our local shops for some supplies for them- water colour paints and food items for baking. There is a large sign outside the newsagency saying only 4 people in the shop at a time, a long line drawn away from the counter and no cash being accepted. We were then told to keep 1.5 m apart from each other. I told the man these were my children, but the man just shrugged, and we walked in together anyway. On the way out I said I hope he wouldn't be abused today, and he explained to me that everyone has been super nice as no-one wants to get sick. Suddenly overnight the prospect of getting sick from customers becomes the new reality and fear of the general public is real. The next shop is a fill your own produce shop, and we must put on gloves and stand away from the shopkeeper until asked to move forward. I can use some of my cash however it is being discouraged. By now I just want to go home. On the way to the next shop I see a local man I know, and he is waiting outside the medical centre to be called in (as per the new social distance order to wait outside until called). He has a sore leg from falling over, I check he is not dizzy, all good. He comes right up to me to chat and I feel glad he isn't following this "distancing" requirement where the assumption is that we are all now a threat to each other, even though this actually could now be a legitimate penalty if police saw us. Once again, I am getting personal reactions and feelings of anger about our new social restrictions. My children and I walk into our local supermarket wondering what new rules have been put in place

there. By this time, I no longer wish to look or talk to anyone and can't wait to get home. Isolation in my home is my refuge more than ever. I feel uncomfortable about all these social controls and I have more fear about my mental state right now than catching any mystery hidden virus. It is very confronting seeing all the lack of supplies in the shops and I cannot help but feel a sense of mounting panic in my now unfamiliar surroundings. I start documenting the public spaces I took for granted before as they are changing daily to demonstrate the extent of government reach in such a visual way, such that I have never been aware of before.



Figure 12: Social controls are visible everywhere & Figure 13: Lines delineate standing spaces



Figure 14: Social distancing programming & Figure 15: Lines on the floor tell the story

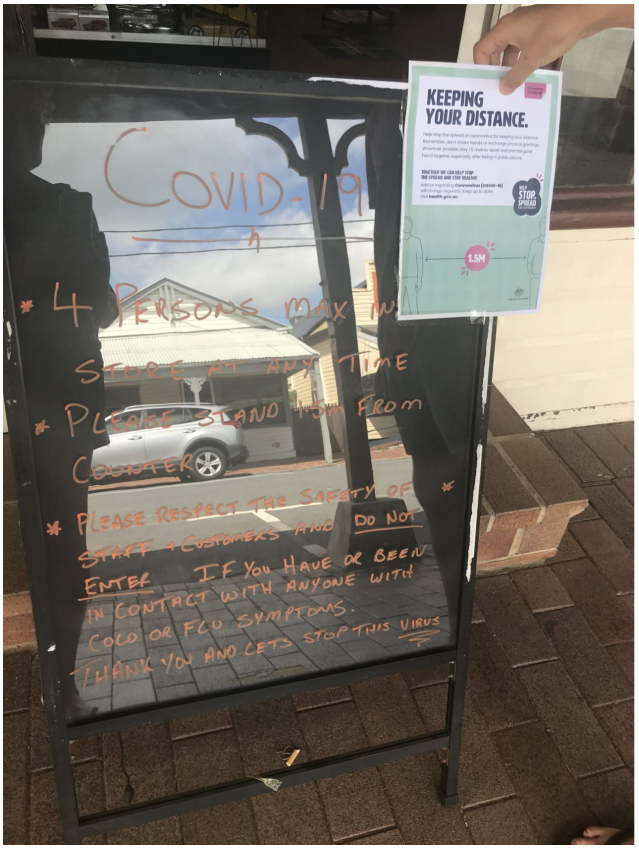




Figure 16: New signs shape our environment & Figure 17: Tape signals government regulations

Friday 27 March 2020

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: the PM steps up isolation rules with all new arrivals to Australia to be quarantined in hotels." (*The Project*, Friday 27 March 2020)

Adjusting and coping with change. Today I successfully ran two online classes for students. I was nervous as the technology was new to me, so I explained to the students I was out of my comfort zone and they were understanding and supportive. The problem is that I can't 'read' the room, it feels eerie for me not knowing what is going on with all the students who are present but have their microphones and

videos off. This was singularly the most jarring experience to date, to be presenting information in such a dehumanised atmosphere. Eventually the 'craziness' I was experiencing faded because we had a group chat and many students contributed and the connection of human voices made things seem less strange. I felt exhausted afterwards and, in the afternoon, took my daughter over to our local beach for a walk and swim. On the way we visited my 30-year-old daughter who lived near the beach. She was quite rude to me, so we left, and I felt a little sad. Once I walked past the abandoned skate park and deserted playground, I saw a few people swimming in the coldish water, many were just walking, and life just felt a little easier here. My eldest daughter rang on my mobile not long after to apologise for her abruptness and then came down to talk with me explaining that her outburst was due to the stress of all the panic around the threat of coronavirus. I told her to focus on the calm faces on the beach. There was a woman just gazing out to sea and her face was so serene, and she had a baby sleeping in a pram next to her. I told her to keep walking in the breeze until she felt better, and as she talked; words gushed out until eventually she was calm again (allowing space for the expression of the anxiety is now becoming familiar to me). I suggest the beach is where we must go to get grounded and find peace.



Figure 18: My daughter on our “deserted” local beach & Figure 19: Seeking refuge at the beach

Saturday 28 March 2020



Figure 20: My busy happy market place has changed

Market talk. I arrive early to my local markets wondering if there will be any stalls open. It is a rainy morning and as I approach there were half the stalls and thankfully my favourite vegetable stall and organic supply store where I have started buying bread flour each week in anticipation of making pastas through winter. They ask if I would like to be on a mailing list and the young man working the till gives me a pen and assures me it has been disinfected to which I reply, "I don't care." I ponder briefly at how blunt I am becoming. With all my goods purchased I can't help but notice all the failed attempts at keeping 1.5 m away at my vegetable stall and I just feel the usual anger rising up in me, now directed firmly at the government, for making us all feel so afraid and trying to complete seemingly impossible tasks such as social distancing at a vegetable stall. I arrive at another stall to purchase some ginger and the married couple running it tell me how people are acting so strangely

now and are all looking at each other with suspicion and fear. My usual friend who comes to the markets has decided not to come but wanted to meet me on the outskirts as she doesn't want to catch this hidden virus. I decline and decide that I too don't want to be around people who fear catching a mystery virus. If she "catches" something I don't wish to be blamed. I think it's best not to see her for a while. Some of my social connections are truly fractured now. I have so much anger welling inside me toward the government. To date I know of no-one who has died, or who is chronically sick or suffering from this "virus." I don't even know of anyone with the normal "garden variety" influenza virus, of course media reporting on the upcoming "influenza season" is strangely absent.

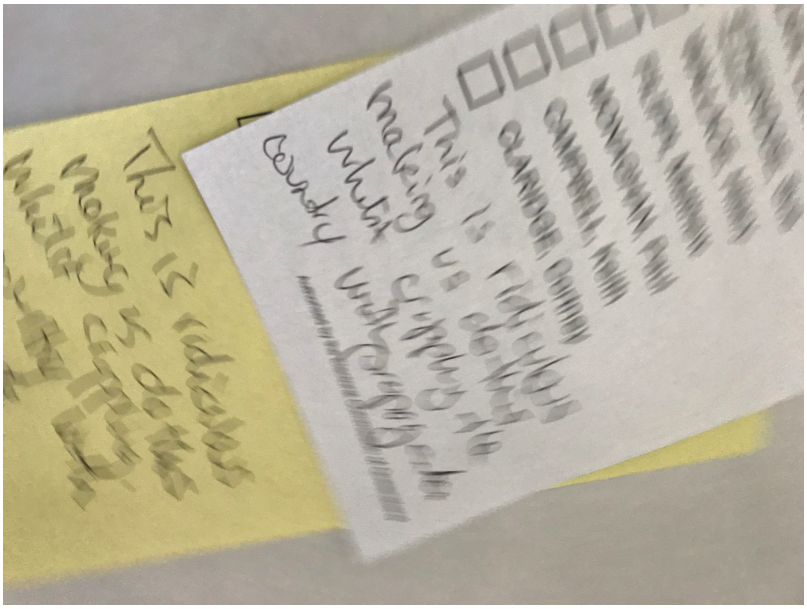


Figure 21: Protest vote

The next trip to town is to vote and despite a "pandemic" which is supposedly ravaging our communities, voting for elected officials is still compulsory. Unfortunately, I could not make an informed choice in who to vote for as no-one was handing out flyers or talking about their policies and I no longer had interest or time to look at any candidates on-line. I decline the offer to be sprayed with chemicals by the woman appointed to sanitise everyone at the entrance and tell her I am allergic

to what she has in her hand, which is not exactly the truth, but I feel like my body does react to unknown chemicals and I don't know what she is planning to spray me with. I walk in and get my forms and write an angry note on both voting forms using the unsanitised reusable pencils on the unsanitised writing surface and leave. This is my first protest vote in my life and at fifty-five years of age at this point I don't even care if this is illegal. My partner has already voted, and he tells me later that one of the electoral staff had a stick that was 1.5m to make sure people were social distancing. I am glad I didn't see that; I might have said something to that woman about being a "tin-pot dictator." I go home completely stirred up about this social distancing/compulsory queuing to vote experience. I refuse to consider that I am dirty/carrying diseases, or in need of sanitising and I am strongly resentful of attempts to control what I put on my body. I wish I had a t-shirt saying, "I am not responsible for your fear."

Monday 30 March 2020.

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: wage and subsidies, mortgage, holidays and bans on evictions; how the big banks and government are making big calls to take the pressure off Australian households." (*The Project*, Monday 30 March 2020)

A long day. Today the television broadcasts the federal health minister dictating that no more than two people can be together outside. I go for a walk for some exercise and then try to get some study done whilst organising my son for the day as well. Compulsory home schooling starts today as the school has now been cancelled for the week. I am feeling angry right now as a parent who is now required to add this to my full-time schedule.

Today was a really hard day as one of our cats was looking very sick the day prior and was now having multiple seizures and was in obvious stress. We didn't know if she had eaten a poisoned rat as there was a dead one outside a few days ago. We

decide it is too hard to see her this way and take her to our veterinarian 20 min away. He informs us he will have to take her away inside and euthanize her away from us due to social distancing measures. I ask if we can be with her while she passes as the thought of her dying with a stranger in a surgery is too heartbreaking. He said that he must practice social distancing and we would all need to dress up with masks etc. I wait whilst my daughter is trying to tell me to not push the point, but I push the point and repeat that I wish to be with our cat as she was so scared already. The vet makes a conscience decision and allows us to be by her side without masks and gloves after he gave her the euthanasia drug. I am grateful we drove to our family vet as another stranger may not have been so understanding.

Later today I delve into independent news reports which question the validity of the "pandemic." I am particularly interested in reports from American television and film producer Del Bigtree's channel called "The Highwire" and news reports from Jamie McIntyre's Australian National Review. I find their arguments intriguing and there are many other doctors in America who are also voicing concerns about the way this "global pandemic virus" is being treated and responded too. I believe that critical enquiry is key to knowledge, but I am feeling powerless to be able to do anything with a more balanced approach to knowledge acquisition. I do believe that this "global pandemic" has less to do with health and risk and more to do with politics, control, economics and power. It is at this point that I take stock and remind myself I can't control the world, but I can control what I listen to and read.

"I do believe that this "global pandemic" has less to do with health and risk and more to do with politics, control, economics and power."

Julia LeMonde

Tuesday 31 March 2020.

> "The world is made available to us through the media and the media set the agenda. ——The second form of media power is due not to the quantitative flow of information but rather to the encoding or framing of information. Meaning encoded by the mass media has a far-reaching impact on the surrounding culture." (Jakob Arnoldi 2009. *Risk*. Polity, 125)

> HEADLINE: "Tonight: huge fines, drone surveillance and even gaol time; that's how significant it is." (*The Project*, Tuesday 31 March 2020)

> "The Federal Government's announcement that gatherings had been limited to two people sounded straightforward enough, but it has caused some confusion. With debates over what is essential vs non-essential, and what constitutes family, the actions you have to take may vary depending on where you live." (*ABC News* 31 March 2010)

Information overload. Today I assess my mental state and I resume daily meditations and keep grounded by taking long walks. At the end of what has felt like the longest month I start to feel that I am now more in control than ever. Whilst I have no control over what mainstream and alternative news relay, I can limit the amount of time I spend worrying, panicking or feeling angry over perceived injustices, government over-reach or new challenges and adjustments. I choose how I spend my day and listening to the plethora of "truths" out there is no longer working for my mental state. Although I have tried to practice cultural relativism and distance myself from my own culture to study it, I decide that a ban on listening to mainstream and alternative media will be good for me. To date no-one in my community has contracted or died of anything that relates to this mystery, hidden

virus, but my life has been turned upside down by the media and the government's agenda of fear. For me the daily risk discourse is obviously disproportionate to probability. I remind myself that a critical medical anthropological approach asks us to examine our intellectual assumptions about reality and know that these realities are shaped by politics and culture. For now, I am safe despite what is going on around me.

Postscript: As at 31 March 2020 the number of deaths attributable to "COVID-19" coronavirus in Queensland (population over 5.1 million) is two adults- a 68-year-old with reportedly serious medical conditions prior to catching the virus and a 77-year-old.

> "[...] in the governmentality tradition, risks are conceptualizations, ways of creating the social as a field for government intervention [...]." (Jakob Arnoldi 2009. *Risk*. Polity, 58)