

Section A: Introduction to the Special Issue: How did COVID-19 surprise us?

Plagues are not new. In recent years they have appeared with increasing regularity. Yet COVID-19 took us by surprise and found us unprepared. Why is this?

The answers are political, but also statistical:

1. Modern medicine is good for those who can afford it. We have come to believe that we are invincible.
2. Unlike Ebola, COVID-19 came to Europe directly, without passing via Africa¹. This makes it bad for Europe but doubly bad for Africa, because our attention focusses on *our problem today* rather than *their problem tomorrow*.
3. In Britain, political energy has been exhausted on Brexit, an issue which left neither time nor energy to do anything else. Europe also has been preoccupied with Brexit and its threats to the EU.
4. Nobody had heard of Wuhan until this disease erupted. But its centrality in air transportation means that the disease spread very quickly – from China to Italy to us. One of medicine’s most valuable assets is *time*. and this time we did not have time.
5. There was no world leadership and world bodies were decimated. Even European leadership was poor. And the UN and WHO have been sidelined and underfunded. We retreated within our national boundaries (and sometimes, as in the USA, subnational boundaries).
6. Health infrastructure including statistical infrastructure was weak. In some countries this had been aggravated by a culture of austerity and nationalism. Tory Brexit has not helped.
7. Data was weak; data rumours were strong. How *different* was the virus? How *infectious* is it? What are the *timelags*? We have been reliant on selective communication from the unreliable Chinese for much of this information.
8. The differential impact of lockdown is vastly unfair. We know that the virus’s damage will fall unevenly, and that the already disadvantaged will be further disadvantaged – what Nassif-Pires and other (2020) call a “Pandemic of Inequality”. Epidemics track along the fissures of society

¹ This is the accepted story in Europe – that the virus most probably arrived via Italian businessmen or tourists returning from China -although there is no documented evidence that any of them were in Wuhan. A more plausible alternative is that the virus did indeed arrive via Central and East Africa. A long-standing consultant colleague/ friend of mine, Brian Cooksey (cooksey.brian@gmail.com) living in Arusha reports that there was an illness outbreak across DRC and East Africa in December and January with victims reporting what were later recognised by their doctors and others to be COVID-19-like symptoms (cough and fever) but no one is reported to have died so, if it was COVID-19, it was a prior mutation of the virus. The plausibility of this route is because of the ‘invasion’ of several African countries – and especially Tanzania - by Chinese businessmen and the reverse flow of 60,000 African students to China each year (<https://theconversation.com/i-asked-tanzanians-about-studying-in-china-heres-what-they-said-129358>) to any of 300 universities including Wuhan; and, of course the substantial number of tourists over the Christmas holidays from European countries to game parks and Zanzibar. If true, this could be important because it may be a demonstration that the virus can mutate – unfortunately for us it did so in the wrong direction.

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We conclude that short-termism is still the order of the day, Boris has stolen Corbyn's clothes, health workers are still woefully underpaid, and we remain unprepared for the next one.

John Bibby (Co-Editor for this issue)

General Editorial

We are flattered by the large number of papers submitted for this issue. Unfortunately, for reasons of cost, it was decided at the last Annual Conference not to print in colour, so we hope that the presentation of charts and figures has not been too spoilt. For the same reason, we have had to limit the number of pages that can be staple bound (88) rather than with a spine. This has meant:

- after the tragic death of Professor Harvey Goldstein on 9th April from COVID-19-19, we solicited memorial tributes from members and others receiving heartfelt submissions from sixteen people, which we have decided to put on our website under the title of 'Harvey Goldstein Memoria';
- carrying over some papers to the next issue and specifically those by Danny Dorling, Diana Kornbrot, Said Shahtahmasebi and dropping one planned section 'Epilogue'; the choice was made by myself on the basis of being relatively less directly relevant to COVID-19 or less statistical.

We are of course still 'open for business' in the sense of welcoming any commentary on the papers included in this issue, any further papers on COVID-19-19; and are particularly interested in receiving papers on countries not covered in section D of this issue.

Another proposal for generating material is the occasion of the publishing of the third RadStats compendium, *Data in Society*. It is a landmark publication, bringing together many of the crucial issues around the production and use of quantitative information.

The contributors to *Data in Society* summarise many of the concerns around the accessibility and use of statistics in contemporary society. Examples include the lack of data from banking and financial organisations hides the extent of tax evasion of taxation. Government agencies are reducing the number of data series they make available for public scrutiny. The number of healthcare treatments in Britain provided privately is growing steadily.

The book is an eye-opener on the difficulties in holding governments and large organisations to account. Do you agree the authors' interpretations?

As the editors acknowledge there are data topics the volume does not cover in detail. These include the use of statistics by legal practitioners, housing and homelessness data and climate change data. The editors of the *RadStats* journal are planning to devote one journal issue to topics raised by *Data in Society*, and to topics not discussed in the book. Could you write an article for the journal on any of the topics above? Are there are areas of debate missing from *Data in Society*?

Roy Carr-Hill (General editor since 2016)