



When Earthquake Hits Pandemic: How to Stay At a Collapsing Home

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Abstract: As the city of Zagreb and the whole of Croatia were slowly entering the phase of almost complete lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic, in the early morning hours on Sunday, March 22, 2020 a strong earthquake hit the city. Based on the witness reports, this article will explore the ways in which the newly adopted, enclosed, pandemic driven intimacy transformed into abare, disclosed flight from that same 'safe' enclosure, and discuss the models of reasoning which people followed at the moment when COVID-19 policy and practice materialized in the reality of a shattering earthquake.

Keywords: earthquake, COVID-19, narrative and normative reasoning, enclosed intimacy

1. INTRODUCTION

In late March 2020, the city of Zagreb and the whole of Croatia were slowly but surely entering the phase of almost complete lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic. The governing body in charge of the pandemic in Croatia was the National Department of Civil Protection. According to an opinion pollⁱ, almost 80% of the citizens considered their measures and actions grounded, well planned and efficiently executedⁱⁱ. Such a high level of trust established in the governing body managing the general crisis (Nichter 2020; Krause et al. 2020), was clearly reflected in a rather positive attitude my interlocutors had towards COVID-19 pandemic. 'We were not that afraid', said a woman, 'but we followed all the rules' 'We didn't think it would go away, not that, but we were ready for two to three weeks of lockdown.' Some readily emphasized looking forward to and actually spending more quality time with their families, doing things they had not done for long before: 'we cooked from scratch, the chef style, mastered the pizza dough, planted plants on the balcony, did some window-painting'. There was even an expectation noted by several parents that they would use this lockdown to improve their intimate relationship with their partners and children, while many COVID-19 jokes (Chiodo et al. 2020) evoked the scene of talking intimately to that 'stranger' at the other side of your own sofa for the first time in years and, surprisingly, having fun. People coming from vulnerable groups (Mason et al. 2020) or from families with the members who were more at risk were, logically, more frightened and felt more the need for solidarity and concern, as explained by a young man: 'My mum works in an elderly people's home, so I took it very seriously, I was in a strict self-isolation.' Binge watching dystopian movies was a reported way of relieving tension by younger generations.

Mundane but also the most intimate segments of our everyday existences had undoubtedly changed under COVID-19 and that change was visible in the perceptions, practices and narratives. Our everyday lives were set up as networks of scapes with home being the centre of motion to which we would temporarily return, just to leave it for yet another everyday displacement, for office, school, gym, dog walk or mall. However, under COVID-19, they were suddenly transformed into enclosed, spatially reduced realities, a perceivable (in)voluntary confinement. The practices of intimacy were adjusted accordingly, instead of meeting temporarily the people we lived with for the evening gravies or morning cereals, we were suddenly in close and continuous contact, with maybe different rooms being the only possible getaway. Even though the practices changed, the lockdown period was, up to then, rather short. The narratives were still emphasizing only the humorous and the positive aspects of the new, confined intimacy, as mentioned above. It all mostly came down to reporting an imagined

transformation into more intimate, better, more fulfilling relationships and more rewarding moments spent with the ones we shared our lives with. Additionally, during the early 1990ies Croatia survived the Homeland war (Schäuble 2014) and frequent in the narrative practices of adult population was the experience of living in the confinement of underground shelters which, in some towns, lasted for almost two years. 'After that, this is easy peasy'. Negative aspects in that short period were reserved for the witty memes about working from home, but that was a global trend and almost all of them were simply shared through social media and were not at all specific for Croatian context. The official narratives shared by media were also uniformly repetitive with the key message being that staying home is safe and can save other peoples' lives.

The atmosphere was nicely summarised by a mother of two: 'I decided I was not going to think about it too much. I was concerned about not knowing enough, true, but I lived with it, stayed home, praying God it would be all over soon'. Then the Earth literally moved.

Based on the reports of the people who witnessed it, following the idea of normative, narrative and moral reasoning (Mattingly 1991, Garro and Mattingly 2001), I will try to reveal the pathway of reasoning people took when two contrasting catastrophes forced people to think for themselves and to run away from the prescribed safety of their most intimate space. Twelve people in total who were immediate witnesses participated in the research. In terms of methodology this is an example of rapid ethnography with the first accounts being collected during the event itself or immediately afterwards. The interviews were repeated for clarity and added explanation a few weeks to maximum three months later.

2. THE EARTHQUAKE

In the early morning hours on Sunday, March 22, 2020a strong earthquake hit the city of Zagreb. It was 5.5 in magnitude on the Richter's scale. 'Run, it's an earthquake!' was usually the first impulse as documented by my interlocutors. 'The first instinct was to get myself under the doorframe, so I did.' To many it was initially just pure shock and horror, totally robbing them of the possibility to think. 'I asked my husband whether it was an explosion, he said it was an earthquake. I started shaking in bed so badly I could not move – I could not go fetch the children, my legs were numb.' Many could not exactly describe what they did in those few moments, during the quake and immediately after it: 'I stayed in bed and didn't move. I think.' Many reported that the earthquake woke them up and that they did not know what to do, just stayed in their most intimate hideout – the bed. Others remembered yelling and cursing, swearing at the improbability of these two disasters happening at the same time: 'What the f... – really?!?' 'My first thought was rather funny, you won't believe it, I thought -here it comes! It's the Corona!' Even though in this one account Corona was looming in all its' might as a creature from a nightmare, to all others the pandemic was irrelevant at that moment. 'COVID-19disappeared in a second, the virus was completely erased in our heads', reported another.

3. THE ACTION

As the initial shock subsided, people were actively deciding what to do and trying to find some grounds on which they could make this decision. 'You know, there are instructions on tram stations as to what to do in case of an earthquake', said a student who was living in Zagreb for just a year and was noticing things that passed unnoticed by Zagreb people. 'I thought about what they said, that the worst accidents happen when people run in panic. So I stayed put'. 'We stood under the doorframe, the small child and myself, the husband was carrying the child with disabilities. By then, we seemed quite composed.' Another one described a similar situation: 'We calmed down the children, texted my mother, but stayed in'. In the aftermath of the first shock, almost all interpreted their home, maybe even more accentuated in this newly defined enclosed intimacy, as the safest place to be.

Still primarily concerned for their own survival, just a few of them reported making an estimate of the damage done to their home: 'I knew at the time that our bathroom was completely gone, collapsed, but it somehow didn't seem important'.

By then people were also desperately looking for news and possible instructions as to what to do: 'We were trying to get to some news, but nothing was there'.

4. NO NEWS AND THE FAKE NEWS

‘We searched for the official news but found nothing. Then there was that fake news on Facebook that the second, much bigger quake was coming.’ Most reported the feelings of helplessness and confusion mount as the minutes passed and there were no official instructions and emphasized waiting for someone to establish control over the uncontrollable.

At that vacuum of real, confidential information not only as to what happened, but more urgently as to that to do, no wonder that a shocking piece of misinformation (Krause et al 2020), - that the second, much bigger quake is surely coming- was accepted by many as coherent and trustworthy and made people act upon it. ‘I believed the worst example of fake news ever – a Facebook post saying the big one is coming in one minute. People shared it religiously’. Mother of five-year-old twins: ‘As I realize now, I wasn’t even questioning whether the big one was coming, I was just looking for the information when’. Uncertain as to what to do, not really able to think straight after a great shock, ushered by a dangerous piece of misinformation, people suddenly felt forced to leave the safety of their homes, which were prescribed by that moment, due to COVID-19 pandemic, as the only safe places. As Nicole K. Krause suggests (ibid et al. 2020), there is a ‘misinfodemic’ surrounding COVID-19 which presents ‘a multi-layered risk’ to all the communities involved. Possibly it was in the context of COVID-19 that misinformation about the earthquake were similarly internalized, since even though many people grabbed their phones to do the fact-checking, which they all reported did, there was nothing but misinformation.

Approximately twenty minutes after the first quake, some information from the authorities begun to appear on news portals.ⁱⁱⁱ Seemingly, they only added to the confusion. The Head of Zagreb City Office of Emergency Management also announced a second quake and urged people to leave their homes. The Ministry of Interior Affairs urged everybody to stay out in the open, away from the buildings. The University of Zagreb’s Seismology Department Tweeted some ten minutes later a short notice saying that no earthquakes could ever be predicted and that any news predicting a bigger quake were false. Adding to that were later live news statements from the members of the National Department of Civil Protection who warned people to keep the proposed social distance. The messages were so conflicting and confusing that a news portal reader wrote as a comment approximately an hour after the quake: ‘Oh, come on, make up your mind, should we stay, or should we go?!?’ By that time, most people were out.

5. (NOT) STAYING HOME

‘I felt I had to do something, going out was doing something. My step-father made my mind for me’. ‘Our neighbour told us to leave, he was a retired police inspector, knew those things’. Frequently people reported listening to someone they trusted, proving ‘that the factual knowledge someone has about a risk is often less relevant than what someone they trust tells them about it’ (Siegrist 2000, Brossard and Nisbet 2007). ‘We ran to the main staircase of the house, my husband, an engineer, claimed the armature should keep us safe there, and then out.’ Everybody ran straight out of the kernel of the newly adopted enclosed intimacy, the walls around which were now both symbolically and literary collapsing. From special type of intimacy their lives exploded into complete negation of intimacy.

Once people decided to leave their homes, that decision alone seemed to make them, in terms of practice, more focused and efficient. ‘Before leaving I turned off the gas, electricity, checked my mobile phone for battery. True, though, first I went out in slippers but returned to get the shoes.’ ‘I dressed up normally, even brushed my teeth’. ‘We had our pyjamas and coats over them; however, we brushed our teeth, funny thing.’ Paradoxically, it seems that by establishing at least some form of(narrative) control over the situation – we should leave the house because the second bigger quake was coming -people were establishing normalcy. ‘Narratives shape actions just as actions shape stories told about them and that stories suggest the course of future actions’ (Garro and Mattingly 2001:17). By trying to act normally, people were trying to establish normalcy, even without doing it consciously. ‘We live in a house with a big yard and a summer shed, we went there and made breakfast for children, bread on butter, the whole thing.’

6. KEEPING THE SOCIAL DISTANCE

Once outside, small groups of people were trying to stay away from other small groups, waiting for the official instructions, shouting and sharing both news and fake news, or trying to keep their queue in front of the butchers' as the ground shook under their very feet for the second time. The second quake was significantly milder.

The scene was straightforward surreal: straight from their beds, wrapped in blankets, as the snow was starting to fall, forgetting about the propriety of being properly clad, the people were yet still trying to keep the proposed, COVID-19 defined, social distance from the other, potentially dangerous bodies. Once people found themselves in the 'familiar' COVID-19 situation, the normative reasoning kicked in – they listened to rules which applied to that situation. 'We shouldn't mingle, or approach people – that was quite a strong feeling. We stayed alone, away from everyone else. We went to the car.' 'People were cuddled in groups, families, I guess.'

The paradox of running away from the collapsing walls only to find yourself in too close a contact with the potential embodied contagion, was almost a dystopian moment. 'Before that moment we didn't think of COVID-19 at all, but the scene with people wearing the face masks sobered us up.' 'There was an old lady in a wheelchair with the face mask on and the snow falling on her uncovered greasy hair. Obese body and a dark brown blanket just thrown over her nightgown. It was embarrassing. Wrong. She seemed naked. Had a simple white nylon bag in her hand, not much in there'. This was the pivotal moment of the whole event with this new enclosed intimacy exploding into its crudest opposite, our corporeal selves unprotected from the contagion, debris and the falling snow. Mute and in fear of the others.

7. THE AFTERMATH

In the aftermath, the earthquake was much worse, all agreed. Narratives over COVID-19 pandemic was already established and internalized, people could rationalize it and practice it. In an earthquake, a situation when all bets were off, where sense was nowhere to be found, where you had to run away from the newly defined, accentuated safety of our homes and enclosed intimacies, and where there were no normative strategies to tell you what to do, people were likely to adopt a plot line which, even when fake, made sense to them, thus 'creating a meaningful short story.' (Mattingly 1991). 'Through narratives, cultures and lives are provided a fictional coherence which they lack in actuality' (Garro and Mattingly 2001:23), and this is exactly what happened when earthquake hit the pandemic. In the following weeks, the normalcy was gradually established and, together with other EU countries, Croatia was slowly lifting its containment measures^{iv}. Our everyday life pendulums were back in the swing of things. The lockdown period was, up to that point, too short to permanently establish some new forms of our everyday existence or to consequentially change the ways we perceive, practice and narrate our intimacies. However, through the earthquake we got a real life glimpse of a dystopian world.

8. CONCLUSION

The reasoning pathway people followed when the earthquake hit the COVID-19 pandemic was the following: (1) after the initial shock and disbelief many were seeking any kind of normative, official instructions. (2) When official reaction was absent, most people, in the search for answers, internalized in their narrative reasoning pathway a piece of fake news, for which they themselves would readily, after the fact, acknowledge as such, but were not able to do that at the moment of the earthquake. Accepting fake news as facts could have also been more probable at the time of the "misinfodemic" surrounding COVID-19 (Krause et. Al. 2020) (3) Prior to the year of 2020 Zagreb was not perceived by its citizens as seismically active region. Earthquake and emergency instructions, even though commonly present in the vehicles of public transport, were seemingly so unnecessary that only the newcomers to Zagreb would notice them. Hence, there was no immediate knowledge among the majority of the people on the proper emergency procedures. (4) Not feeling confident enough in their own decision-making, still in search for answer as to what to do next, most people would choose someone to trust who, through their own reasoning, was expert enough, such as an engineer husband or the neighbour, retired policeman. (5) After most of the people made the decision to leave their homes, the need for normalcy kicked in. Again, without admittedly having no emergency procedure training whatsoever, some people reported doing what was normal in the early

morning, such as brushing teeth and having breakfast, as if doing what was normal would establish normalcy itself. (6) The moment people came out of their shaking buildings was the pivotal moment when the COVID-19 narrative, this direct request to *stay home (and save lives)*, directly collided with the, still almost intuitive, escape from that same, deemed dangerous, homes. (7) Interestingly enough, the old COVID-19 pandemic narrative seemed to emerge as dominant at that very point, probably because it was, by then, already internalized by many people. The need to keep away from others and maintain social distance was already an integral part of normative, narrative and moral reasoning, and masked, distanced groups of people were the prevailing image even at the moment of what seemed to be a life-threatening situation.

ⁱⁱ<https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/pogledajte-kako-gradani-ocjenuju-rad-stozera-civilne-zastite-i-koje-mjere-bi-im-bile-prihvatljive-dode-li-do-drugog-vala-epidemije-koronavirusa-20200606>

ⁱ<https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/kalinic-izadite-van-ocekujete-se-drugi-udar-1387752/galerija-411150?page=10>

ⁱhttps://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/european-roadmap-lifting-coronavirus-containment-measures_en

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