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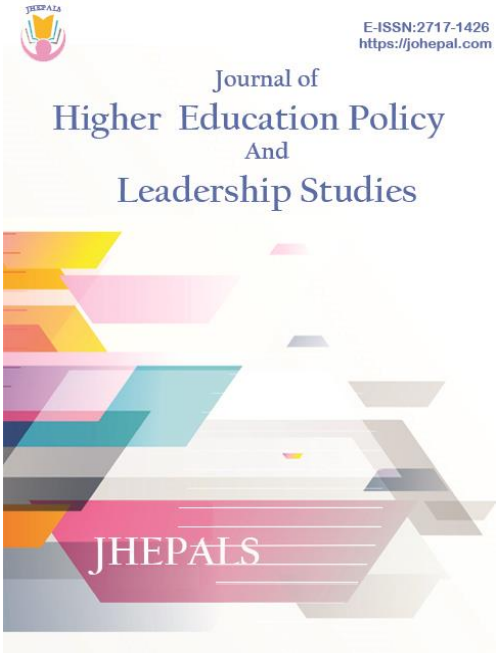

Academic Reflections in Times of Crisis: Ten Fading Images of a Fatal Summer

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Abstract

The scholars of the future may be bemused by the academic tribulations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. How will temporal distance affect their understanding of this extraordinary time? What records will be available to them in the next decades and centuries, and how will they extract meaning from qualitative research of the past? Analysis of personal reflections will most likely remain subject to the same concerns about data limitations in the future, as is in the present. Yet, it is precisely these human stories that have the potential to tease out the significance of what is likely to be an inflection point in history. The case featured in this paper is a creative rendition produced for a postgraduate class on reflective thinking. It aims to stir the imagination, provoking discussion on what we, as humble learners, need to understand when considering crises and communicating our perceptions and personal experiences across time and cultures. It also exposes the fragility of data and the limitations of temporally-bound interpretations, which insights derived from fragmented data entail.

Keywords: Higher Education; COVID-19; Reflective Thinking; Imagery; Narrative Analysis

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Academic Reflection

Monday Morning, March 2, 2099

Dr. Flora Firestone* shifted in her office chair – a cool vintage piece from the 2020s – to have a closer look at the face mask. Her grandmother's words reverberated in her memory: "they were just brainless". Her grandmother, a very serious and rational person, and a staunch believer in discipline and order, just could not fathom why some people would rather die from a virus than wear this simple piece of cloth. Yet, hundreds of thousands perished during the COVID-19 pandemic. As an educational psychologist, Flora tried to understand why, back during the pandemic, academics had no power to persuade those suicidal humans to wear simple face coverings, which would protect them and others from getting sick. What was wrong with the face mask? She glanced down at the piece of fragile, floral print cloth in her hands, incredulous. Was the influence of the populists and business leaders so strong that it drowned out intellectual voices and those arguing that people's health was more important than economic considerations? Was what happened in the 2020s an act of mass murder or suicidal ideation? Some sort of collective madness? Was it unavoidable? To Flora, these questions were fascinating, but data pertaining to the role of intellectuals in times of global crises – the sponsored research project on which she was working - was scarce.

Dr. Lumina Wong called, interrupting Flora's thoughts with a reminder to send a review of the 10 intel-images that she teleported yesterday. "Sorry, to bother you Flora," she said. "I know you are extremely busy. I need your response regarding those intel-shots as soon as possible – can you do it by tomorrow afternoon, please?" She explained, "The ten images come from hardware that we were able to resurrect several days ago. You know it's lucky if we succeed at restoring a tenth of the data from those rusty memory slots. The Great Flood was merciless and those flimsy private computers suffered most; the old technology was awful – so poorly protected! I wish humans had been smart enough to store their data on clouds served by satellites, rather than on those quaint old 'motherboards,' she chuckled. Anyhow, what can we do? We're happy to get any scraps of information we can and your review is really important to us. Our Intelligence Unit wants data sooner, rather than later."

"Okay, let's have a look", conceded Flora, readjusting the multiple screens on her desktop. "Why do they call them "images" and not stories or narratives?" Poised to take notes, she poured another mug of coffee, and started to read.

Intel-image #1_05.082020UW

"…In the winter-spring semester of 2020, the deadly COVID-19 virus brought the academic world to a halt. Between February 13 and August 4, 2020, a much-read global edition of University World News featured 666 articles about the pandemic fallout: "Universities cancel graduation ceremonies due to virus" (Feb. 13); "Science has been placed on hold in face of coronavirus" (Feb. 18); "Virus-related closures disrupt university entrance exams" (Feb. 27); "Coronavirus restrictions affect cross-border research" (March 13); "Contact learning in universities suspended, students sent home" (March 16); "Returning students add to new spike in coronavirus cases" (March 18); "International students struggle under containment measures" (20.03); "Who will field the cost of conference cancellations?" (March 21); "Thesis defence goes online as universities remain closed" (March 21); "Turn to online learning shows varying degrees of readiness" (March 26); "Five years to recover global mobility, says IHE expert" (March 26); "Students demand crisis support in grants, not loans" (March 30); "COVID-19 raises families' anxiety over abducted students" (March 30); "Students go on unprecedented online strikes for equality" (Apr 03); "Post-pandemic outlook for HE is bleakest

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for the poorest" (Apr 04); "Several institutions announce faculty hiring freezes" (Apr 04); "After COVID-19, nothing will be the same" (Apr 06); "Early-career scientists brace for impact of COVID-19" (Apr 11), "Universities asked to set up student mental health helplines" (Apr 11); "Students fall victim to a war against all Africans" (Apr 14); "Civility and unity are needed, not racism" (Apr 23). This constitutes a mere selection of headlines published in one academic news outlet alone."

Intel-image #2_06.08.2020UW

"I am trying to understand the anxiety generated by the American media. Stories of a steep death toll, lack of treatments and devastating symptoms are all over the internet. Cities went into lockdown. With local and international flights cancelled, ticket prices for increasingly scarce flights went up. Some airlines went bust. Even after air-travel resumed, strict compliance with restrictive inflight health and safety regulations, as well as a two-week quarantine upon arrival decreased the viability of travelling for many. Many international students were trapped abroad. Some were repatriated via charter flights, at the risk of catching and transmitting the virus on the way home. While all students were urged to leave university residences and study from home, many internationals, especially from developing countries, did not have the option to do so, and were left stranded without access to a stable environment, meaningful employment, subsistence or visa security. The capacities of universities to assist students were typically limited. Months went by with no prospect of returning to the old "normal", as no one knew when the turmoil would end."

Intel-image #3_ 20.08.2020

"What was initially characterized as a short-term flu-like outbreak on a regional scale quickly turned into a long-term global pandemic. By August 20, 2020, the WHO reported over 22 million registered cases of coronavirus in 216 countries, territories and areas, with the global count of confirmed deaths reaching over 780,000. The governor of Texas reported a complete failure to control the spread of the virus, as infection rates reached over 7,000 infections per day in the state by the second week of August. Many authoritarian regimes claimed to be successful in controlling and stemming the virus, but either refused to provide case statistics, would twist data, or were shown to simply lack the necessary resources for accurate diagnoses. Reporting and response practices varied significantly across democracies and autocracies, which tended to juxtapose each other's failures, rather than attempt to find joint solutions".

Intel-image #3_ 20.08.2020

"In the new "normal", we have suddenly witnessed the rise of an anti-mask subculture, as some citizens eschew expectations that all should wear face masks in public spaces, insisting they prefer death over losing the freedom to do as they please (in this case, necessarily translating to the freedom to infect others). The internet is inundated with post-truth cyber-warriors claiming that the pandemic is a hoax. Meanwhile, profit-motivated purveyors of late-stage capitalism collude with the pandemic denialists, urging everyone to go back to work, to shop, spend and consume like nothing had happened. The survival of their businesses is a matter of higher priority for them than the health and safety of their employees and customers. In campus towns, many family businesses are increasingly vulnerable, as their main customers – the students, suddenly disappeared. For many of my corporate colleagues, the call to "work from home" has proved to be a challenge, as managers and supervisors worry about performance and evaluations, which used to be tied to the superiors' ability to show face around their busy offices, meetings and corridors, all the while controlling their

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employees' time, bodily presence in and out of the office, outfits and haircuts, as well as re-broadcasting compliance reminders. In authoritarian regimes and environments, the legitimacy of managerial hierarchies is suddenly challenged, as it is not clear how the implementation of managerial control would be maintained in the "w.f.h." environment. Some "bosses" ignore the risks to their employees' health, and urge their subordinates to manifest their allegiance by going back to offices and putting in long hours at work. Many employees report mounting fatigue and anxiety, stressing the mandatory triumvirate of social distancing (2 meters apart), hand-washing (at least 20 seconds using the surgical technique), and mask-wearing (no touching or removing with unwashed hands).

In the academic world, many campuses embraced WFH due to large student populations alongside limited carrying capacities. The massification of higher education had been previously justified as a means of income generation (as was communicated in professional circles) or a way to meet demands for access and equity (as was communicated to the public). With social distancing in place, it was hard to satisfy the access and equity quotas for larger numbers of students in overcrowded and poorly ventilated spaces. Classrooms, lecture halls and libraries were all exceptionally susceptible to the transmission of infectious disease via both air and touch. Moreover, some campus managers became cognizant of potential liabilities arising from students contracting COVID-19 on campus, especially if parents sued them over a mandatory classroom attendance requirement that led to their children's death. Accordingly, "stay home", "learn from home" and "work from home" were framed as the better options. Within research-intensive institutions, communities of scholars, students and professionals were also informed by medical departments and socially-responsible health scientists about the importance of staying vigilant, anticipating continued virus hybridisation, and refraining from falling for news about quick fixes, which was being propelled by some desperate neoliberal companies and news outlets."

Intel-image #4_22.08.2020UW

"Frustrated with the demands and tensions arising from the transition to online- and home-based learning, many teachers and students suddenly found themselves feeling nostalgic for face-to-face interactivity, classroom-based teamwork exercises, and the feel of camaraderie and solidarity experienced in a common physical learning space. Instead of making life easier, working behind a digital screen reinforced feelings of isolation for many users, who had been urged by the authorities to stay home, practice "social distancing" and avoid public spaces in view of an increasing likelihood of contracting and passing on the virus. This troubling state of affairs looked to have no end."

Intel-image #5_24.08.2020UW

"The 'stay home' directive called into play multiple and confusing interpretations for me, a peregrinating scholar. Where is home? My ability to exist in cyberspace as an intellectual entity seemed to be the only conciliation in this situation. Staying in the cyber vacuum seems safer, as the challenges of the pandemic are further exacerbated by political unrest rattling the once predictable environs of a world we all thought was on its way to becoming better, as we criss-crossed its borders with relative ease and increasing frequency. Now, the pandemic urges us to rethink the concept of digital nomadism, moving all aspects of our academic work online: teaching, research, program admissions, theses supervision and examination sessions, administrative meetings, and scholarly conferences; all while remaining mindful of the additional complications caused by the health crisis,

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political calamities, and unceasing poverty. When we all live in lockdown, will we be able to develop a more sophisticated, deeper appreciation of each other?"

Intel-image #6_25.08.2020UW

"This cross-cultural, border-transcending digital life comes with its own set of anxieties. They differ from the stresses of living in physical reality, its artefacts and artificial constructs. Marianna Papastephanou from the University of Cyprus evokes the bewildering – simultaneously exiting and frustrating – interplay of shadows and lights in her pandemic-era academic cave. She says,

> By disrupting time, the pandemic becomes an 'opportunity' for movement to another, better place. Modern utopian metaphoricity involves the journey, the passage to another space or time, and the question is how we cross the border, what we carry along: ideally, 'we can walk through lightly, with little luggage', shedding our old and new plagues as we go. But, I think, if our being spatiotemporal is no biased self-/human-description, another question about our luggage is: what light would dispel our shadow? And should it? For, bodies moving in relative light/darkness have shadows that move along, even when diverse technologies of the self paradoxically render them invisible. (In Peters et al. 2020)".

Intel-image #7_26.08.2020UW

"Prior to the pandemic, my research and networking relied on fieldwork, but not in cyberspace; my teaching - even less so. What we use technologically is rigid and authoritarian. The Big Brother of the Internet urges us to comply with the protocols entailing the use of centralised and fully controlled systems. These are designed by military engineers who have a poor imagination of the real world. A new video-calling app, Zoom, suddenly appeared on the market and we thought that it was more flexible. At least, it let us control virtual backgrounds and have private chats in the larger chat room. The platform was better than others. Yet, what initially seemed a safe and comfortable option was eventually revealed to have a dark side. As Liz Jackson, a Hong Kong-based professor, reveals,

> technologies are not neutral. Many embraced Zoom before thinking through its privacy and security policies (Paul, 2020). Zoom users' personal data gets sent to Facebook, even if they are not Facebook users. In some cases, classes have been hacked by trolls posting offensive and hateful content. These realities signal that greater caution is needed in light of the ethical dimensions of selecting and using online meeting tools, especially in educational contexts, where students cannot normally decline professors and institutions' choices. (In Peters et al. 2020)."

Intel-image #8_26.08.2020UW

"The previous comforts of our established frameworks of communication have certainly disappeared or became unwieldy. Nic Fleming, a science writer based in Bristol, draws on the experiences of the attendees at an international conference of the Human Genome Organization (originally meant to be held in Perth, Australia, but rescheduled and hosted virtually):

> Unexpected attendees included Shu, Forrest's three-year-old daughter, who was heard shouting "Daddy, Daddy" during a session he was chairing, and a cat that walked across the foreground during its owner's talk. More serious problems included a fault during

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> the live streaming of one of the plenary lectures, issues playing back on-demand videos and delays in questions reaching speakers during some live sessions.
>
> A cocktail party using video-conferencing software failed to replicate the spontaneous social interactions and discussions that might have been expected had it occurred in real life. "It wasn't a disaster," says Forrest. "But a Zoom meeting with 40 or so people listening to one person just doesn't have the same feeling as a party where people form little groups and talk properly over a beer or wine." (Fleming, 2020)."

Intel-image #9_26.08.2020UW

"Kitties and kids pop up on my Instagram feed quite often. Do they disperse my focus and take away from my "work from home" regimen? Who cares about the single-minded focus or neoliberal performance indicators anymore? In my pre-pandemic past, I missed opportunities to be around my family. I had no time to fully engage with my children. But I have time to do that now. For corporate servants like me, the lockdown has been a blessing in disguise. My family became unexpectedly reunited, with children flocking back to the recently emptied nest. "Staying home" means "staying together", which takes on a wholly unique meaning in this time of crisis and vulnerability.

I have an opportunity to admire my daughter's creative talents: her creative writing, editing, inimitable painting, artful cooking, hairstyling, which I can see in real time and in situ, rather than in images shared on Instagram. While I certainly know about her talents, it's different when she shares them with me in our immediate reality. In virtual reality, I failed to appreciate them with the same unhurried sense of admiration. Meanwhile, my son helps me round the steep learning curve associated with using a variety of online platforms for my work. I enjoy our frequent intellectual exchanges (at times heated debates) during the lockdown. Both young adults challenge me on a number of assumptions and untested knowledge. My wife periodically emerges from her own cyberspace to take me and the kids on a tour of her exceptional urban garden, where she lovingly tends to a variety of greens, including tomato plants large enough to invade the neighbouring balcony. In my previous busy life, I was missing the sense of "presence" and would have failed to observe the life-affirming daily miracle of tiny shoots growing into a bountiful garden, bestowing us with our first ever homegrown harvest."

Intel-image #10_27.08.2020UW

"My students report enjoying their time in cyberspace. For some reason, they experience a sense of collective responsibility to persevere, reorient, and adjust to the new 'normal'. Some say that they do this in defiance of ruined opportunities for face-to-face chats and in-person friendship-developing group-work. In embracing the unexpected twists and turns of cyberspace, they are able to learn from each other, as well as about each other. Maybe it is inevitable that the future will play out in cyberspace? In any case, we need to prepare the tools to function, if this eventuality is indeed to become our reality. Life in cyberspace certainly seems to have encouraged some students to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their work. Some noted that they were able to enhance their learning by paying more attention to what their peers were saying, rather than to what they were wearing, and to what extent their own emotions were synchronised or asynchronized with others. In becoming less focused on their surroundings, they suddenly felt more attuned to the

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classroom discussion. Some even feel that they have learned to appreciate and respect disparate learning styles and strategies. Students drew on each other's strengths, while compensating for each other's weaknesses. Leadership in learning implied not only taking responsibility for an arduous task, but also engaging others in engrossing discussions about the prevailing hardships. Discussions have become more lateral.

Furthermore, being part of a borderless cyberspace highlighted students' engagement with disparate emotive discourses, dissents and discontinuities derived from individual experiences of politics, cultures, careers, and tutelages. Naturally, frustrations were unavoidable for those who expected full control of their environment, or became involved in power games. In my online classes, some students certainly suffered more from the anxiety of expressing themselves in the virtual space. Others, simply ignored confusing flows of emotion or information. They said and posted whatever came to mind, thereby relieving themselves of any such anxiety. Still others focused on interpreting the experiences, lessons and stories from previous stages of their lives, reflecting deeply and seeking wisdom from the past. These online flows of intellectual and emotional expressions became critical for maintaining some sense of stability and community, especially when news of illness and death among friends and family members threatened to shatter the essential constructs of normality at a time when reminders of our own mortality were ever-present."

Message from Dr. Firestone to Dr. Wong

Lumina, I have reviewed the intel-images you sent me. I will share with you some thoughts that I jotted down while going over the data. My impression is that we are dealing with a diary of a scholar (as intel-image #5 suggests), most likely international, however of unclear institutional or academic affiliation. It looks like we are dealing with the insights of someone who knew the academic world well and understood the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. At times, this person becomes poetic or elusive, which often characterizes the overly-sentimental academic writing of the pre-Flood era. I would suggest looking into whether this particular style of writing is repeated in any of our other archival materials. I have run a similarity index to check the authenticity of the analysed images, and have not found any similarity to these shots in the archived datasets of that historical period. The intel-images seem to be original. You are certainly in a better position to determine whether this is correct, or to what extent these intel-images can be of use in research at your Intelligence Unit.

The first few intel-images suggest that the writer was interested in contributing to academic media and literature. However, these pieces include random reflections, rather than detailed and meticulous analyses of an academic nature. It is possible that the ten intel-images represent full diary entries for the indicated days; however, it is not clear if there were other entries on the same days or in-between those days. Nonetheless, the intel-images seem to be interconnected and your AI seems to have sorted them correctly in terms of the flow of narratives.

If your Unit's major concern is the extent to which this type of writing is affected by the AI (as it usually is these days), I am quite confident that the provided intel-images are a human's writing. I don't think that the AI creators in the military lab would allow for anti-authoritarian feelings, certainly not to the extent that these feelings transpire in the intel-images. This can be one clear indicator in support of my argument.

If you have full access to the IU archives, try to find the University World News (UWN) articles mentioned in intel-image #1 on what was unfolding in the global academia in the month of March – early April 2020. See if you can extract more data from there. I can't locate the UWN in my archives.

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Academic Reflection

It is possible that the military office prevents us from having full access. It is not clear why the author emphasises a range of headlines from that period. Are those selected headlines? Key headlines? They seem to show a progression of events. However, do they cover the whole spectrum of events and details?

As far as I understand, there was a lot of concern about students in those days – as there is now. However, these concerns are of different nature. Intel-image #4 points to a state of distress among academics and students. For some reason, many did not seem to find solace in the online formats of academic life (while intel-image #10 indicates that some students were ahead of their time). The emotional impact of the pandemic comes across as being significant across all the intel-images. It also seems that while the media kept everyone alert, this created only despair, given confusing public messaging (I wonder if this might have been a source of the mass resistance to mandatory mask wearing). As far as I can see, the campuses were informed about the implications of the virus. For some reason, though, there were still international students stranded and kept in survival mode. I get the sense that the campuses were inhumane at times – they simply told students to stay if they wished, without income, or left them to perish. Yet, we cannot say based on the current data whether the campuses were better prepared for the pandemic than the rest of society. It is possible that society as a whole lived in poverty, or there was a general tolerance of inequalities and problems with access to basic goods and services. In that regard, we may have been presumptuous in assuming that the campus was the organizational heart of the society, meant to offer leadership based on its capacities related to information gathering, sophisticated analysis and effective data management.

One of the reasons for thinking that these intel-images come from one person is that there are repeated references to Peters et al. 2020. I have found that paper in our cloud systems and referenced it for your convenience. I would be happy to discuss my sketchy thoughts on the intel-images when we meet for Sunday brunch. Although I am not sure that this is the most important thing to chat about over a glass of good wine. We never stop talking shop though, do we?

Best regards, Flora.

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