

Journal of a plague year

Steven D Brown

Nottingham Trent University, UK

As I write, the United Kingdom is entering the seventh week of lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The headline news today is the grim figure placing the death toll in the country as the highest in Europe. Yet, like many other academics, my everyday experience of these momentous events is focused on the mundane challenge of shifting teaching and research online as the boundaries between home and work begin to crumble. The broader world is refracted through snatched ‘socially distant’ conversations, tweets and continuous conference calls.

This is a privileged position. I am not among the population who are deemed ‘clinically extremely vulnerable’ to the virus. Nor am I a ‘frontline worker’ whose role requires me to risk exposure in order to maintain key services. My job has not been furloughed, and I am fortunate indeed to be in a position to continue working. Given this, it is not surprising that like many academics, I feel a pull to say something about the situation, to make a contribution or to demonstrate the relevance of my expertise. But how?

Some scholarly commentators were fast off the blocks in publishing their reflections and ‘hot takes’ on the pandemic as the scale and global spread became more apparent at the start of the year. Exchanges and ‘conversations’ between prominent scholars – albeit principally online – rapidly emerged and then disappeared, rather in the manner of the ill-received celebrity sing-a-thon posted online by the actor Gal Gadot. Perhaps no one really wants to spend their time in lockdown being lectured on ‘what Foucault might have thought of COVID-19’.

At the same time, there has been a curious reversal in the public appetite for academic interventions in public debate in the United Kingdom. During the Brexit referendum campaign which resulted in the hugely divisive decision for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, the prominent ‘Leave’ politician Michael Gove claimed that ‘people in this country have had enough of experts’. It seems the reverse is now true. The expertise and opinions of clinicians, epidemiologists, biologists and even social scientists now seem in great demand. After a decade of dire warnings of cuts to research funding, every day brings a new rapid response grant opportunity related to the pandemic and its effects on the health and social fabric of the country.

Memory Studies has not been exempted. The past few weeks have seen media articles on topics as varied as the need to facilitate journal making practices among young children, the danger of ‘false memories’ being created during lockdown and, most pressingly, the urgent call for the public to video chat the garden eels in a Japanese aquarium lest they should forget what human faces look like. Those of us in the academic community who have been intensively schooled in the need for ‘outreach’ and ‘engagement’ as part of the ‘impact agenda’ can find much to admire in these inspired initiatives.

The very nature of the core concern at the heart of Memory Studies – the uses made of the past in the present – means that we should not find it too difficult to find a scholarly ‘angle’ on current

Corresponding author:

Steven D Brown, Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham NG1 4FQ, UK.
Email: steven.brown@ntu.ac.uk

events. But the pandemic and the lockdown response has also created situations upon which we are actually well qualified to comment and debate. One of the most immediate questions turns around how lived experiences of this period will be recorded and archived and the manner in which this will inform the contested histories which will subsequently emerge. Sarah Gensburger's (2019) evocative and impassioned account of the grassroots memorialisation following the Bataclan neighbourhood attack in Paris clearly demonstrates the importance of communities taking immediate ownership over capturing and curating individual experience. Similarly, Matthew Allen's (2015) study of the contested commemoration of the 2005 7/7 attacks in London points to the tensions that arise when direct experience bound to a critical event is recruited into national political narratives. In both cases, the lesson is that the diverse experiences of both coronavirus and the lockdown measures require their own immediate local co-ordination in advance of the interpretative frames which will be subsequently imposed. We see this already in the United Kingdom in a rapidly emerging debate about the value of a weekly tribute to National Health Service workers ('clap for carers'), where efforts to express concern and respect have been critiqued for misdirecting attention from a decade of chronic underfunding and the current crisis around Government failure to provide adequate Personal Protective Equipment. Some guidance on how grassroots memorial organizing can occur when there is little freedom of movement and association is urgently needed.

The literature on flashbulb memories offers rich resources to understand some of the more extraordinary aspects of the British response to the pandemic. The hospitalization of the Prime Minister Boris Johnson, for example, has created a febrile public atmosphere, the extent of which can be gauged by the claims of some right-wing commentators that fears over Johnson's personal health could be directly equated with that of the national collective health (a figure of thought with an extremely unpalatable historical lineage). As William Hirst et al. (2015) have shown, both flashbulb memories and memories of flashbulb events can become highly inconsistent over time, although the latter may be moderated somewhat by attention to media. Given that such memories are typically the prism through which a specific historical period is framed, this should give cause for concern that the complexities of global political and environmental processes might come to be memorialized in the longer term by way of wobbly, but vivid recollections of a specific controversial political figure. How can we free memories of extraordinary times from becoming hooked around such images?

Hirst et al.'s (2015) finding that media attention assists with correcting event memory accuracy is also worrisome. Current survey and polling data show that journalists and major media organizations are the least trusted sources of public information. This is particularly the case in relation to the UK national broadcaster, the BBC, whose coverage of recent developments in the Brexit process and the 2019 General Election has alienated significant portions of the electorate. It is more likely that the social media will provide the longer term framework through which memorialisation will be supported. Again, sub-areas within Memory Studies, such as Digital Memory Studies (Hoskins, 2018) provide fertile ground for speculation on the framing of the pandemic through media ecologies. Here, there is a tension between the 'excess' of infinitely intersecting streams of commemorative activity and the deliberate lack of curation and preservation which defines media such as Instagram stories. Some of the richer aspects of life under lockdown will by their very nature not survive. There are some emerging initiatives which are already tackling this issue of how to curate digital memories of the current experience, such as the Care and Solidarity During the Covid-19 Pandemic platform established by The Sociological Review Foundation. Doubtless there is a difficult balance to be struck here between treating coronavirus

as a research opportunity, or as a space for supporting communities and publics in reflecting upon what feel like seismic social and economic changes in the course of their very emergence.

Whilst it is to be hoped that these relatively recent bodies of work will prove instructive, it is perhaps worth taking a wider historical perspective. In 1722, Daniel Defoe authored *A Journal of the Plague Year*, an apparently direct account of the Great Plague of London which occurred in 1665. The gap between these dates indicates that this text is unlikely to be straightforward memoir (Defoe was a young child at the time). In fact, the text is a collage of first-person narrative, historical minutiae (such as the range of specific ordinances adopted around maintaining infection controls) and broader statistics and death rates. Despite the ambiguous status of the material, and the historical remove in publication from the events described, Defoe's work remains one of the most powerful and informative accounts of the events. It is often compared to Samuel Pepys diarised accounts of the same year. This latter source offers a more authentic feeling of being grounded in lived experience but does not deliver the narrative coherence and clearly articulated sense of the unfolding nature of event found in Defoe's work. The personal can indeed become problematic to historical understanding in Pepys' work. The one aspect of the complex socioeconomic politics in Pepys account of the Great Fire of London in 1666 (the historical bookend to the Plague Year) which most British-educated persons can recall is that he buried a wheel of Parmesan cheese in his garden to preserve it from the fire.

Contrasting Defoe and Pepys, we recognize a number of themes that are all too familiar to Memory Studies: the tension between memory and history; the potential for unreliable narrators and inconsistent accounts; the framing of relevance and what it includes and excludes from memory; the role of material culture in shaping social history; the problem of remediation and historical revision. And of course, we can see here the privileging of certain (male, wealthy) speakers over others. But perhaps most critically, we can see different strategies with regard to leavening experience with a critical dimension. In Pepys diary, events necessarily turn around his personal perspective, reflecting his cultural position and his specific concerns (cheese-related and otherwise). But in Defoe's 'journal', the recognition that the account may not be reliable, that it also includes material that could only have been assembled retrospectively, that perspective can shift and wander because the relationship to direct experiences on which it is based is complex, is precisely what makes it so compelling as a narrative point of entry into the Plague Year.

So what does the 'plague year' of COVID-19 pull us towards as scholars of memory? I would argue that while we should be enthusiastic facilitators of grassroots and community-based memorialization, we also need to promote ways of engaging with broader narratives and perspectives that lie outside of direct first-hand experience. In the United Kingdom and elsewhere, the pandemic lays bare how the advanced neoliberal policies adopted in the past decade have calculatedly stretched health and social care programmes to their breaking point. We must not allow the story to become one of heroic struggles over an enemy virus steered by brave leaders. We must not forget the recent history of austerity, rampant marketization and populism in the glare of flashbulb historical events. It is also good to be reminded that experiences of the pandemic vary enormously – from creativity to boredom, from slowed pace to unmanageable activity, from moments of pleasure to perpetual anxiety and terror. Rather than call for a renewed recording and archiving of all experiences of the pandemic, we might instead make the case for some serious reflection and working through of how different stakes in events relate to one another. It is probably okay that events do not make a whole lot of sense, or to hold together contradictory versions. We should probably not be that worried at this precise moment that time seems to dilate or contracts around extraordinary and bizarre flashbulb events. But we should also start preparing for the collective work of ensuring that the Plague Year does not overwrite the challenging, difficult

memories we have of the recent global social, economic and environmental shifts which have made us all so vulnerable to the pandemic.

References

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Author biography

Steven D Brown is Professor of Health and Organizational Psychology at Nottingham Trent University, UK. His research interests are around social remembering within ‘vulnerable’ groups and experiences of secure and community-based mental health service use. He is author of *Vital Memory and Affect: Living with a Difficult Past* (with Paula Reavey, 2015, Routledge); *Psychology without Foundations: History, Philosophy and Psychosocial Theory* (with Paul Stenner, 2009, Sage) and *The Social Psychology of Experience: Studies in Remembering and Forgetting* (with David Middleton, 2005, Sage).