

Diaries unite against COVID-19

Blair Stewart, 20 April 2020

Who thought that diaries could be a useful weapon against illness?

Perhaps the most famous diarist of all time might be Samuel Pepys. His accounts of life in time of plague are invaluable in understanding that time. His entries for the beginning of January 1666 have a special resonance as they cover a period where, as now, great hope is placed in a decrease in infections sometimes to be dashed as the epidemic grows again:

January 3rd 1666

... at the Duke's with great joy I received the good news of the decrease of the plague this week to 70, and but 253 in all; which is the least Bill hath been known these twenty years in the City. Through the want of people in London is it, that must make it so low below the ordinary number for Bills.

January 10th 1666

Thence to the 'Change, and there hear to our grief how the plague is increased this week from seventy to eighty-nine.

(Extracted from: <http://www.pepys.info/1665/plague.html>)

Jump 350 years and 18,000 km to Sunday's daily media conference with New Zealand's Prime Minister and Director-General of Health. The Prime Minister commented:

I think one thing that's really important to point out is that our success in contact tracing really comes down to the information that people provide. ... So, if I could make two pleas to members of the public: ... The second thing is to all New Zealanders: think about all your movements as if we may come and interview tomorrow and try and find out who you've been with. ... We, essentially, have to do forensic interviews with people to find out where they've been, who they've been in contact with, and try and trace the origin of COVID-19.

This led to a journalist's question:

Media: Just on contact tracing, in terms of people, sort of, keeping diaries, you've said that people's own information is best. As we look to potentially move to level 3 and people moving around more, are you asking people to be keeping, sort of, a written record of what they're actually doing?

PM: It's not necessarily that it's best, but it's incredibly helpful. Yes, I would ask New Zealanders to think about doing that. Just keeping a quick note of where you've been and who you've been with will not only help them; it will help us. But if you imagine even asking someone six days later to recount every movement over a period of time, it's an incredibly hard task—even, it would be, at alert level 3. And so I am asking New Zealanders to just have new practices, new things that they do at the end of the day, just to help us, because the better that we are able to do at alert levels like that, the sooner we can move further down the alert levels and the sooner life feels more normal.

(Extracted from: <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2020-04/1904%20PM%20and%20DG%20Press%20Conference.pdf>)

Wikipedia tells us that:

A **diary** is a record (originally in handwritten format) with discrete entries arranged by date reporting on what has happened over the course of a day or other period. A personal diary may include a person's experiences, thoughts, and/or feelings, excluding comments on current events outside the writer's direct experience. Someone who keeps a diary is known as a diarist. ... A diary is a collection of notes.

Today the term is generally employed for personal diaries, normally intended to remain private or to have a limited circulation amongst friends or relatives. The word "journal" may be sometimes used for "diary," but generally a diary has (or intends to have) daily entries, whereas journal-writing can be less frequent.

Although a diary may provide information for a memoir, autobiography or biography, it is generally written not with the intention of being published as it stands, but for the author's own use. In recent years, however, there is internal evidence in some diaries that they are written with eventual publication in mind, with the intention of self-vindication (pre- or posthumous), or simply for profit.

By extension the term **diary** is also used to mean a printed publication of a written diary; and may also refer to other terms of journal including electronic formats (e.g. blogs).

So, if you haven't kept a diary before it has the advantage of being useful if you eventually write your autobiography!

What has any of this got to do with privacy?

The good thing about diaries is that they are a means to record information within the individual's control. You can put as much or as little detail as you like. You can keep them secret (Pepys used a personal code to mask notes of his sexual life) or, if you prefer, publish them to the world (in a blog, for instance). That's a plus.

Another good thing is that they will help existing public health tracing systems to work. If those can be made to work well it will help enable New Zealand to avoid pressures to use more coercive means of surveillance as may be required in some places overseas. At the moment we are in a fortunate position where every case of infection can be personally followed up by public health teams. As the Prime Minister said:

I often reflect, when I sit and talk with the director-general about an individual case, or when I talk about an individual person in hospital care, that we are still, despite battling COVID-19 ourselves, in a very privileged position to be able to talk about individuals, when I look overseas and see that some places, they are tracking thousands a day. And so that does mean that we're lucky, but we're lucky because every New Zealander has joined us in a mission to get rid of COVID-19 in New Zealand.

This fortunate position contrasts with what is happening in places where the number of cases each day are overwhelming. Individuals have a part to play in making the system work to the community's benefit.

Paper diaries voluntarily kept at home might be a low tech and practical option for many of us. A positive feature for data protection is that there is no remote access by anyone else be it the government or hackers. It would only need to be retrieved if one becomes infected and is interviewed to trace possible sources of your infection or to trace persons who might have been exposed to your infection.

Of course, paper diaries aren't a silver bullet. They have many limitations such as being incomplete (who remembers starting a diary as a child and giving up!) or inaccurate. If they fell into the wrong hands, they might reveal information you want to keep to yourself even in your bubble ('Who is that woman/man you happen to be in a close contact with every couple of days, darling?'). A lock or code might be helpful in such cases!

Electronic records of course are also an option. Many people use electronic calendars on their phone or PC and that could be a practical option.

However, notwithstanding their limitations they would seem to be a useful tool e.g. can you easily remember what you were doing each day for the last 14 days? Perhaps in Level 4 lockdown, many of us can eventually work it out as we have very few trips out of the home. But what about essential workers? Or any of us in Level 3 or – looking forward to the day – Level 2?

So, sharpen your quills, find your pen and paper, or set something up on you tablet, or reactivate your blog, and consider starting a diary of each trip out of your bubble and who you are in contact with. Give some thought to how to keep the information secure, accurate and complete.