Technologies of Public Security: Deploying Imaginary Borders

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On the 23rd of January, I sat on the fourth floor of a packed-out library, writing my dissertation. My thesis was on building pandemic resilient airports, and the lessons we could take from the 2003 SARS pandemic (another coronavirus that spread globally as asymptomatic but infectious passengers transited through airports). My institutional email app pinged. Glad of the distraction from semiotic theory I read the news that we had all been waiting for:

Coronavirus update

To: All students and staff

Dear student,

You may have seen the news coverage of the recent Coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China, which has also been detected in Thailand, Japan, South Korea and the USA.

The University has been closely monitoring the situation and liaising with government and NHS agencies to get their latest advice. It is important to stress that, based on the latest advice, the risk to people in the UK is <u>**low**</u>.

'At last', I thought. The University is taking this outbreak seriously. When I got to the final sentence however, this logic was flipped on its head. 'It is important to stress that... the risk to people in the UK is <u>low'.</u> I instantly recalled the basic tenet of infectious disease control that has come to frame much of my academic life: 'infectious disease knows no borders'.

Global aeromobility, the freedom of humans to travel intercontinentally within hours via networks of airports and airliners, has changed the spatiality of disease. We can no longer afford to talk of distant illnesses in far-away lands, nor of the ability of national borders to 'filter' infected passengers from healthy ones. Viruses do not adhere to our airport security regulations.

The frustrating reality (that the University seemed to have omitted) is that, given the asymptomatic incubation period of the virus, and our ability to travel globally within that time, the UK can never be at (bold, and underlined to be symbolically certain) '<u>low</u>' risk. Of the countries listed in the email, each had multiple direct flights each day to the UK. At least one of them had daily flights into Edinburgh.

The next email was not reassuring:

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> ## Coronavirus: updated information and advice
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> Dear student,
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> I am writing to give you an update on the latest advice around the Coronavirus outbreak. This includes guidance around 'self-isolation', new advice for returning travellers, and services that we have in place to support you throughout this period.
>
> Eight confirmed cases of Coronavirus have been reported in England, so you may be worried that this poses a risk to you and others here in the UK. However, there have been no cases reported in Scotland so far, and the UK risk level remains moderate.

On the 10th of February, around two weeks after the initial email, the University attempted to allay fears by once again suggesting that the threat was geographically detached from the city, whilst subtly indicating that the UK's threat level was no longer <u>low</u>, but was in fact now '[remaining] moderate'. While cases had been reported in England, this was therefore of no worry: none had been reported in Scotland. At reading this, my blood ran cold. Scotland is a short train journey away from England.

What a strange time, it seemed, for the University to deploy the UK's political geography to create an imaginary separation between an infected 'them' (England) and an uninfected 'us' (Scotland). What would happen when the virus inevitably boarded one of the 11 daily east coast mainline trains connecting Edinburgh to England? This journey may have already happened, days prior and without symptoms. It seemed that the University's approach was to prevent panic, rather than promote preparedness. An email I sent back, urging more proactive and rapid-to-implement changes (setting all computer screensavers to 'wash your hands', for example) was ignored.

The third and final email we received, on the 25th of February gave an updated number of confirmed cases, but reaffirmed Scotland's symbolic distance from England:

> ## Coronavirus: updated information and advice
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> **To: All students**
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> Dear student,
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> I am writing to give you an update on the latest advice around the Coronavirus outbreak, which includes important new advice for travellers from additional countries and further guidance around 'self-isolation'.
>
> Thirteen confirmed cases of Coronavirus have been reported in England, so you may be worried that this poses a risk to you and others here in the UK. However, there have been no cases reported in Scotland so far, and the UK risk level remains moderate.

At this point, the University's communication strategy felt like that of a retreating army, desperate to shore up morale with (no doubt inadvertent) false estimates of risk, but gradually being driven back from its geographical position (initially in five foreign countries), closer and closer to home. The strategically deployed, but totally imaginary England-Scotland border constructed in the second email became a heuristic that framed the third. It seemed to serve as a symbol of safety, when this ignored the realities of the UK's interconnectedness. Preparing the student body for the inevitable arrival of the virus had been sacrificed for a delay in panic.

So why might the University have chosen to frame its communications in this way? And was I witnessing a micro sample of a macro trend in favouring panic prevention?

It seems that the University employed political geography as a 'technology of risk reduction'. One which attempted to assert, through the construction of an imaginary border, a distinction between the chaos of the 'infected' regions, and the 'order' of Scotland.

This is a fairly stereotypical method for delaying panic and maintaining the functioning of the status quo for as long as possible. Framing infectious diseases as something outside that can be kept outside offers comfort by constructing the virus as a containable object, in a world of containers.

Reactions at the macro, governmental level appeared to mirror this discourse of the homeland's exceptionality as a sanitary space. An initial reaction by Western nations was to 'repatriate' their citizens who were in Wuhan at the time, to the perceived safety of home. News media, as well as prominent politicians, began to anchor discourse surrounding the virus to Wuhan, if not to China itself, such that they became entwined. National borders became an essential technology in constructing a sense of safety, and demarcating Wuhan (or China more broadly) from the rest of the 'sanitary' world. As the pandemic evolved, the spatiality of this 'unsanitary' region expanded. Those areas still believing themselves to be protected by virtue of geographical distance from the initial outbreak site were deeply misguided.

In the infectious disease world, our nation states do not exist, and neither do our borders. We exist in a highly interconnected network of nodal entry/exit points for people and pathogens alike. A virulent pathogen, no matter where it started can pass through any airport unseen. The fact that our national borders now exist as in-land networks of regional airports make us particularly insecure from viruses, despite the economic and mobility-related freedoms that our global aeromobility has produced. Watching COVID-19 approach from afar, rather than preparing for its arrival, has proved a dangerous policy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
Harry Fletcher is preparing to graduate from Edinburgh University with an MA in International Relations, and has accepted an offer to study Public Health (MSc) at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. He works on novel approaches to pandemic resilience and at the intersection of political science and infectious disease control.