

Ideas



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The point of view of

Bird flu: a crisis of steerage

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After the tsunami and the wake-up call to governments by the UN, in the wake of Katrina and its politico-organisational fiascos, here we are in the clutches of a threatened flu pandemic. September was the month of alarm cries - the pandemic of 1918 - October is that of denunciations: "economic irresponsibility", "political caution", "media circus". The risk may well be to soon fall - as in many current crises - into a specific form of cynicism coupled with a general breach of trust. A quagmire before the virus even strikes.

The problem is not on the technical front - the possibility of a pandemic well and truly exists - nor on the planning front - it is good to know that we are working relentlessly. The real issue is that of steerage. Our methods of governance are found sorely wanting, in societies increasingly confronted with unconventional risks and crises. These are destabilising challenges for which, as yet, decision-makers, experts, mediators and citizens are wholly unprepared.

The bird flu threat, like many other emergent crises, is epitomised by violent discontinuity. Everything hangs upon a phenomenon of mutation: a terrain in itself highly susceptible to contagion by the slightest ripple - our societies are made up of interconnected, interdependent ensembles, prey to ultra-rapid domino effects.

In truth, our scientific cultures are stricken with a deep malaise in the face of such realities: "*Science deals with regularities, Art deals with singularities*", in the words of American historian of science, Alvin Weinberg. Similarly, our cultures of management are at home with the establishment of procedures, not with irregularity and disorder. As for our cultures of decision-making, they prepare for every eventuality except steerage in unstable and illegible domains. They are focused on serial, validated responses, when the question now is to discern what questions need to be asked, with whom to act, and on what basis.

Herein, two generations meet. The older generation, "dug in" to a bunker of suicidal references like: avoidance - the plea is that "nothing is yet known for sure" - the illusion of miraculous technical solutions - such and such products, plans and simple rules will be wheeled out only to prove totally inadequate -, the fear of mass "panic" - the obsessional refrain that people must be "reassured" (remember the cloud of Chernobyl). And the new generation, which is everywhere and nowhere: The technical expert giving his diagnosis, with the risk of bordering on a tone of "as long as I'm alright, Jack". The politician trying to find a middle way between "transparency", "reassurance" and "spiralling anxiety" so as not to be outstripped by the expert or the journalist. The economic sector is largely absent. While the whole is played out on a media stage where the logic of information is mixed with that of entertainment (or even reality shows), where seriousness rubs shoulders with showmanship,

and where pride of place is given to the stressful, the morbid, or the sound bite which hits hardest, undermines or destabilises. Even if everyone is striving for the best, the overall effect, after three weeks of administering the cocktail over the airwaves, only reinforces the general sentiment of discredit.

It is urgent to regain control. And we can already note the following few requirements on our agenda.

The involvement of leaders: in the face of now vital challenges, risks and major crises must be monitored at the highest levels of our organizations. That presupposes the rapid familiarization of executive committees and chairpersons, heads of central administrations and ministers with crises of the most complex order, in a manner that goes well beyond traditional "media training" sessions. It was thanks to his personal involvement in such vital issues that the mayor of New York - who had taken part in crisis simulations such as a chemical attack on his city - was able to face up to the tragedy and inspire the necessary confidence to deal with it in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. *"He had more faith in us than we had in ourselves."*

Situation intelligence: to enlighten leaders engaged upon such unpredictable terrain, it is imperative set up think-tanks that are specially trained in such non-conventional grammars. A handful of large vital-network companies (IT, telecoms...) have already begun to equip themselves with such supports.

Mobilisation of citizens: as "crises of texture" which deeply affect the "fabric of society" gain ground, it calls for the implication of a multitude of players. The citizen must be placed at the centre. And the whole must reflect a positive vision, not widespread suspicion. It is via upstream clarity in the enunciation of challenges, via frankness with regard to the impossibility of drawing up a crisis scenario ahead of time, and via personal example in terms of action that we can manage to convince, encourage and mobilise people.

The genuine challenge for today's crises is the re-establishment of trust in the face of shocks which border on the inconceivable. Leaders can no longer be mere heritage managers. They must be able to anticipate major crises. Thus, they will be better placed to call for citizen involvement too in a lucid and responsible manner and the media may more readily play its truly informational role.

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