

SHORT FICTION



Pandemonium

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It happened to everyone overnight.

Every.

Single.

One.

The software just continued adding names to the list. Person after person, with details of when, where and how they broke the rules. The real problem was that we couldn't stop watching the list grow. The more people who tuned in, it seemed, the faster the list grew, as if hits were feeding the artificial intelligence. Governments and privacy activists urged the public to delete the software, but this only induced the social phenomenon known as the Streisand Effect.

How could this have happened? It was only just over a year that a seemingly innocuous headline appeared out of the Hubei Province in Central China. Around the end of 2019, the local government of the largest city in Hubei, Wuhan, confirmed that health officials were treating many cases of pneumonia. At the end of January 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global health emergency.

In February 2020, a man in the Philippines died due to the disease caused by the novel coronavirus (still yet to be given the name COVID-19), followed by France, Italy, Iran, Brazil and the United States. Canada followed suit with its first reported death in early March 2020.

Then a tsunami of lockdowns ensued. Non-essential businesses were closed down such as restaurants, fitness centres, and retail stores. These were the first of a multitude of government rules that propagated through the globalized community. Social distancing advised people to either reschedule their plans to a later, undetermined date, or keep a 2-3 meter distance from each other at all times. Indoor gatherings required participants to wear face coverings like surgical masks or cloth masks. N-95 mask stocks required by frontline healthcare workers were getting slimmer and slimmer by the day.

People were scared. People were anxious. People were confused. Will people's livelihoods ever bounce back to normalcy? Will residences be foreclosed, or will renters be able to stall eviction? Will local shops lose their businesses, leaving the top superstores scarce in any competition? Will children and adolescents have the same productive experience through online learning? These questions continue to be asked even to this day.

What people imagined life would be like in a new decade was effectively sterilized like bacteria on hands after a suggested 20-second hand wash. Yes, no longer were the days when people would think about whether to wash their hands after a trip to the washroom. Even a trip to the grocery store needed sanitizer upon entry and exit, using what stores provided as well as your own private collection. Every trip outside just felt better concluding with a clean pair of hands.

With people locked away in their households, governments and firms were forced to evolve. People adapted to a virtual culture, both in their work life and in their social life. The face-to-

face conversation became screen-to-screen mimicry, yet somehow the intimacy remained and even blossomed in productive introverts. Nonetheless, we were all still learning to utilize tools that seemed so excessive, so targeted to computer experts in your organization's IT Department. Applications like Zoom sprung into existence and were accepted with open arms. Who cares about privacy when one can seamlessly manage the artform of holding meetings.

It wasn't just governments and firms. People evolved. We didn't anticipate that in the span of only months, we developed this heightened sense of awareness. One could argue that as people transitioned online, our focus was mainly on electronic devices. That was, and is still, indeed the case. What I meant was that people began to notice incidences, both in the real and virtual world. When someone attended a rally in support of some group, when someone expressed opinion against some cause, people were there to publicize and criticize. No matter whether their political views, gender pronouns, or racial privileges were known, groups with opposing opinions were loud in their fervour. It wasn't so bad when draconian governments and firms were boycotted. But when people were boycotted, it felt different. The reasonings for boycotts seemed to be independent of time, of the situation of concerned individuals. Worst of all, there was no neutral stance on an excommunicated person. You were either in support of them or against the mainstream cause while participating in this polarized game.

The phenomenon was given the name "cancel culture". Of course, this was occurring before the COVID-19 pandemic, and most of this came from good intentions. Social justice movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter arose with cancel culture as a major component of each movement's machinery. Upheaval was easily coordinated through online groups and widespread communication methods. Smartphones were recording atrocities every second of the day, most were frequent occurrences that

were just hidden from public scrutiny for decades. People slowly became empowered and found their voice. Today, in pandemic times, this empowerment escalated exponentially.

With differences in national, regional and local policies, as well as individual opinions, people would be caught breaking some government restriction implemented to “flatten the curve”. Evidently, flattening the curve became such a overused, political term that when epidemiologists and virologists tried to explain the scientific meaning behind the idea, people were already tired of hearing about it. They instead wanted to blame, wanted to point their gavel at those guilty of the unwritten law of transmission reduction. Citizens would be filmed hosting monstrous parties, refusing to wear masks inside Costco warehouses or outside on sidewalks, packing to travel for long delayed vacations. These videos were instantly uploaded to sites like Facebook, Twitter and the recently popular Tik Tok, combined with catchy-captions and humble-hashtags for search engine optimization. You were either a “flat-curve believer” by following public health guidelines perfectly, or a “flat-curve denier” in cahoots with a viral murderer. Platforms once used for correcting systematic oppression were now funneling videos of candid slip-ups, leaving a trail of life-shattering destruction along the way.

Then, it appeared, out of the virtual ether. The first records of the MASKaren platform were linked to posts by anonymous users of sites like 9gag and Reddit. MASKaren was originally a platform that allowed users to upload videos of people not wearing their masks. This was adopted by millions of users in just two weeks, oddly as long as the SARS-CoV-2 incubation period, shared through word-of-mouth and mainstream news alike. What was great about the platform was its innovative artificial intelligence; using facial identification software to effectively single out the rulebreaker’s name and

location, while giving them a “Karen Score” based on the rule they are breaking and their reaction to getting caught. Users were fighting to release videos in order to achieve a maximum Karen Score of 10. The highest score, being a 9.9, is currently a video of a white woman calling the police feigning being in danger, after a black man told her to put her mask on and leash her dog in Central Park, New York City. She was fired from her job less than a week later.

Names of every man and woman who was seen breaking government rules in a MASKaren video populated the platform’s global ranking list. Its memetic popularity was extremely successful, as the world wanted to know which country had the highest-ranking Karen of all time. Following suit, like a tsunami of lockdowns in response to a microscopic enemy, online campaigns were organized against the top Karens on the list. Initially, these were the most serious offenders, those that were hosting parties of 100 people or more at secluded houses, or those demanding to remove their masks once on-board flights to the Caribbean. Public outcry led governments and firms to evolve yet again, to take this platform extremely seriously. Offenders were cancelled, quite literally, from the real and virtual world. They lost their careers, while also alienated by family and friends.

A movement, starting from good intentions like most justice movements, was created. Uploaders on the platform weren’t just users, they were warriors, they were vigilantes out surveilling the world when authorities couldn’t cast their eye in that particular direction, at that particular time. Users wanted to help, navigating the frightening and confusing world that gave most people such high anxiety. Positively speaking, protests against mask-wearing guidelines grew thinner and less often, as top MASKaren warriors flew drones above the mask-less crowds identifying hundreds of offenders in one video. No more will a modern, civilized society toler

ate flagrant abuse of freedom that consequences in potentially spreading a deadly pathogen.

Cancel campaigns, as they became known, were even more efficiently coordinated. Despite these campaigns affecting mainly those in the middle and lower class, high-ranking government, business and cultural elites were also taken down. A provincial minister going on vacation when advised to stay home? Cancelled. A popstar complaining about the cancellation of a popular music festival, while reducing the severity of the disease? Ironically, cancelled. There were no grey zones, no exceptions, when the current objective of the human civilization was to “flatten the curve”.

Ambitious updates to the platform changed the way warriors became known and popular. Before, warriors with videos averaging the highest Karen Score would gain celebrity stardom. Now, warriors who identified the most offenders to populate the global ranking list rose to fame. The purpose of this monumental change, by the anonymous creators, was a way to deter those not taking the pandemic seriously by accelerating the cancellation of COVID-19 restriction offenders. With this, there were three other questionable updates to the artificial intelligence software: 1) the identification of offenders against other social justice movements, 2) the seamless incorporation of all videos about an offender on warrior accounts from other platforms, and 3) the automatic notification of an offender’s social network upon identification based on their online footprint.

The first update occurred less than 24 hours ago. The final three changes were implemented less and 8 hours ago. The moment they did, it changed everything. Names were just populating the MASKaren global ranking list at an alarming rate. Millions of people’s phones, of warriors and those just lurking on the platform, received notifications of family and friends

breaking COVID-19 guidelines, involved in potential racial or gender discrimination, and perpetuating radical ideals. It was pandemonium. Government officials and activists were too late to heed warnings. You see, everyone, every single one of us, was cancelled overnight.

It is now December 31st, 2020. In other words, it is the last day of a year that destroyed and ended an enormous number of lives around the world. Since organizations were swift in implementing automatic resignations for verified MASKaren offenders, unemployment rate in many countries skyrocketed. People forced into their homes due to not only because of the upcoming holiday, but because of the lockdowns and just having nowhere else to go.

But perhaps there’s a silver lining, albeit quite a thin one at that. On this New Year’s Eve, as I gaze at my family in the living room, and a Zoom screen of some of our neighbours and extended friends, I can’t help but think about how much closer I am to these cancelled people. To my mother, who I now talk to on a regular basis about family finances. To my little brother, who I now encourage when he’s having trouble in his online homework. To our next-door tenant, who I now purchase hand-knitted sweaters from their local business. To my best friend, who I comfort when they talk about their grandparent passing away. You see, despite the cancellations of those who deserved or didn’t deserve it, those that really mattered in life opened up to me in ways that I could never have imagined.

Will the end of this pandemic tear up or thicken that lining? Only time will tell.

Happy 2021.

Sincerely,

- Me