

The Problems Presented by the COVID-19 Crisis —Centered Around Infodemic

Sei WATANABE*

Abstract

The COVID-19 Crisis throws us the various problems. Infodemic is one of them. Its practical risk is that false or unreliable information spreads rapidly and widely in the environment where anyone can broadcast what they want. How can we overcome the risk? It seems difficult to solve this problem by relying on individuals' information literacy. This paper considers the reason from the viewpoint of the meaning of human existence in the information society.

Keywords: infodemic, information society, human existence.

1. Problématique

Great achievements have often been created out of harsh situations. For example, the various achievements of Isaac Newton (1643-1727) were created in a time where there was a widespread outbreak of the black plague. In addition, the achievements of the linguist Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) were born in the process of him fleeing various countries, and the philologist Erich Auerbach (1892-1957) wrote *Mimesis*¹ at Istanbul, where he had been deported. Auerbach's motivation to write this work was his wish for Europe, which had been divided by World War II, to be united again. Like so, when placed in a harsh situation, researchers carry out work with a strong awareness of problems towards current circumstances.

2. Problems of *infodemic* in the COVID-19 crisis

The situation of the current COVID-19 crisis also makes one clearly aware of several problems that we need to work on from now on. The first of these problems is regarding the causes that brought about the worldwide spread of this virus. To put it concretely, these are causes such as globalization, urban congestion, and environmental problems. These problems were being debated in the past as bearing the potential for bringing about a pandemic. However, placed into a situation where our activities are actually restricted, the sense of danger towards these problems has become more urgent.

The second problem is regarding infodemic. Infodemic is the situation where a large amount of information is spread through the medium of the Internet, and real-life society receives the impact. In the past, the spread of information that has no sufficient basis was indicated to be extremely dangerous in a computerized society. In a dangerous situation, we feel uncertain towards our lives and futures in the real world. Uncertainty then causes us to more easily believe in information that has no basis. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic forces people to stay in their homes for long periods of time, increasing opportunities for encountering information. This kind of increase in opportunities for encountering information is, coupled with uncertainty, making the dangerous nature of infodemic even greater.

The third problem is the problem related to the meaning of human existence in a computerized society, but this is greatly related to infodemic. What can we do to protect ourselves from the threat of infodemic? A simple solution

* Tokai University, Center for Liberal Arts.

to this question is for the receiver of information to examine carefully and judge the correctness and falseness of each piece of information. However, I have doubts on whether this proposed solution can be effective. The reason for this is because human beings have an inherent desire towards quickness of speed, and computerized societies are making this desire greater.

3. Desire to survive

Milan Kundera (1929-), a novelist from the Czech Republic, once stated the following.

“Man desires a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished, for he has an innate and irrepressible desire to judge before he understands. Religions and ideologies are founded on this desire.”²

The assertion that we are born with a desire towards making immediate judgments has been also debated in molecular biology. According to Shinichi Fukuoka, human beings can see special patterns and rules within random phenomena. For example, there are instances where we see a person’s face from among patterns on the bodies of beings such as animals. Fukuoka states that, in the long process of fighting against changes in the environment, human beings obtained this kind of ability to see things intuitively to survive. This is the ability that makes immediate judgments possible. This ability truly worked in a useful way in circumstances of being always threatened by death in the natural world.

In current times, we are no longer living in an environment where there is always a possibility of being preyed upon, or where we suffer from long periods of starvation if we let a moment’s opportunity escape us. However, according to Fukuoka, “Now, our goal is not survival itself. Our goal has changed to finding the meaning of our existence. However, our habits of perception and thought that we had obtained in the past still firmly remain.”³ The desire towards making immediate judgments is an ability that humanity has obtained through many years to survive. When thinking about it in this way, Fukuoka’s assertion that this ability still currently remains inside us is convincing.

4. Quickness of speed of information

In addition, there is the debate that current society, which is advancing in computerization, excessively places value on quickness of speed. The philosopher, Masao Kurosaki, states that, “Communicating and dealing with information immediately and without delay may very well be the invisible goal of computer society. Before we know it, our <nature> will also transform into a nature that admires quickness of speed.”⁴ According to Kurosaki’s argument, this nature of admiring quickness of speed makes the concepts of “information” and “knowledge” vague. These concepts originally were clearly differentiated based on value towards quickness of speed. For example, the value of information such as weather information and transport information are given through their quickness of speed. Meanwhile, the value of knowledge such as literary works and philosophy books is not that much related to quickness of speed.

However, Kurosaki indicates that in current times, where information media have developed, “It seems like everything is dealt with as <information>, and this differentiation has been forgotten.”⁵ The computerization of knowledge means that knowledge will have value as something that is useful right away. At the same time, this leads to bringing about a decrease in value in knowledge-related actions that take time, such as learning, intensive reading and careful deliberation.

From what is written above, the situation that we are currently placed in has the aspect of human beings, who had the desire towards immediate judgements in the first place, obtaining, through the development of information technology, a society freed from the dissatisfaction towards the slowness of things. It seems too optimistic to say that, under this kind of situation, individual receivers of information will venture to take the time to carefully examine the correctness and falseness of each piece of such vast amounts of information, one by one. Therefore, one has to say that relying on the information literacy of individuals to avoid the threat of infodemic does not have much effectiveness.

5. Concluding remark

Kurosaki states that, “In current times, when the quickness of speed of information is itself an absolute value, it feels as if < I > am becoming less of a maturing being than an immediately reacting machine. In other words, a being that is no more than a connecting point where information goes in and flows out.”⁶ In life under the COVID-19 pandemic, we continue to be manipulated by information on new numbers of infected people communicated by various media. Each time, this information works on our emotions, and is forgotten the next day. This is ironic, as it means that we changed from a goal towards survival itself to a goal towards finding meaning in existence, and it has actually turned out that we are machines that react immediately to information.

The harsh environment of the COVID-19 crisis has cast a sharp light on the interrelated problems that are 1) various causes that brought about the pandemic, 2) the dangerous nature in computerized societies, and furthermore, 3) the meaning of existence of human beings.

Notes

¹ Erich Auerbach: *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard Trask, Princeton 2003.

² Milan Kundera: *The Art of Novel*, translated by Linda Asher, New York 1988, p. 7.

³ Shinichi Fukuoka (2009), p. 59.

(in Japanese) 福岡伸一『動的平衡—生命はなぜそこに宿るのか』、木楽社、2009年、59頁。

⁴ Masao Kurosaki (2002), p.82.

(in Japanese) 黒崎政男『デジタルを哲学する、時代のテンポに翻弄される<私>』、PHP出版、2002年、82頁。

⁵ Ibid., p. 83.

⁶ Ibid., p. 84.