Digital technology is helping us memorialise the pandemic, despite the government wanting us to move on

February 25 2022, by Mark Honigsbaum

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As the warnings to "stay at home" fade from memory and we're told we must "learn to live with COVID," it is easy to forget the first dread-filled

days of the pandemic two years ago. Then, kisses, hugs and handshakes were freighted with danger and, panicked by the images from Italy of intensive care wards filled with elderly patients, we rushed to supermarkets to empty the aisles of bleach and disinfectant.

Sure, there had been precedents: in 1918, there was a similar panic when hospitals were inundated with allied troops whose lungs had been compromised by "Spanish influenza." In response, several US cities banned large public gatherings and passed public mask ordinances, while Australia imposed quarantines on soldiers returning from Europe. But these measures were far from universal. For instance, New Zealand did not attempt to quarantine returning troops.

The fact is that before COVID, entire cities had never been locked down at the same time and never before had social distancing been applied at such a scale—and for such an extended period. This was a remarkable achievement, one that few experts thought possible before the pandemic.

But the coronavirus pandemic was also unprecedented in another way. For even as we learned to keep our distance from other people, lest they prove unwitting carriers of the virus, so there was also an explosion of virtual social connections. Thanks to Zoom, Facebook and Twitter, we could "see" friends and family and offer words of solace, even if we could not touch them and wipe the tears from their eyes.

How this will affect remembrance of the coronavirus pandemic is difficult to say. From the moment Prime Minister Boris Johnson grasped that COVID threatened to overwhelm the NHS, he has been at pains to present the pandemic as a crisis comparable to war. But while war memorials can draw on a familiar suite of symbols and rituals, the same is not true of pandemics.

For example, despite killing over 50 million people globally, there are no

contemporary memorials to the 1918–19 Spanish flu anywhere in Europe or North America. Nor, with one or two notable exceptions, have those who perished in the Great Flu pandemic been memorialized since. As Guy Beiner, a historian of modern memory, puts it in a new collection revisiting the 1918–19 pandemic, "the Great Flu is essentially a lieu d'oublie, a site of social and cultural forgetting."

It is also hard to locate meaning in a natural phenomenon lacking clear heroes and villains. "Who are the perpetrators if the Flu is caused by mutations of a string of RNA?" asks the memory studies scholar Astrid Erll in the same collection. "What could the moral of the story be if victims are claimed randomly?"

However, for those who have lost close family members to COVID and who will not soon forget their grief—and the government errors that contributed to their trauma—there is an urgent moral story to be told, one full of agency. This story is written in red ink on the National COVID Memorial Wall, an unauthorized "people's memorial" on Albert Embankment emblazoned with 160,000 hand-drawn hearts, one for every British victim of the virus.

Organized online

Conceived during lockdown by COVID-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, a patient-activist group that organized online, the wall is a vivid example of how social media and connective digital technologies are enabling the remembrance of the pandemic in ways that would have been inconceivable in previous centuries. And it is not the only example. The Anglican church is also having to adapt its rituals and traditions to the digital age: hence St Paul's Cathedral's Remember Me project—an online book of remembrance containing the names of thousands of victims of COVID.

The result is a new politics of memory, one in which activists, with the support of religious and moral leaders, are increasingly able to dictate what form memorials to the pandemic should take, and whose memories should be accorded prominence.

Despite Johnson's repeated invocations of the blitz spirit, we were not all in this together. Indeed, when most of us were observing the social-distancing regulations, the prime minister and his Downing Street staff were holding social gatherings in an apparent breach of the lockdown rules.

History suggests that pandemics do not end when politicians tell us they are over but when they become objects of cultural forgetting. Yet, for many of us, there can be no end to the pandemic as long as questions about responsibility for the death toll remain unanswered and the coronavirus continues to claim lives.

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