

EDITORIAL

Precautions
are fine;
panic is not

It's what we don't know about coronavirus — what we can't yet know — that largely dictates our response to the early stages of the pandemic.

The closures, the cancellations, the disruptions to our routines — all are precautions that reflect our inability to know with anything like precision how rapidly the virus might spread, or how severe its effects might be.

Some of these decisions seem monumental because they are unprecedented. We are naturally shocked that most sports, from high school to college to professional leagues, have been suspended. But the cessation of games — even immensely popular ones such as college basketball's March Madness — is a reasonable response considering the clear connection between mass gatherings of people packed shoulder to shoulder, and the potential for spreading coronavirus.

It's natural for people to compare the effects of coronavirus to other infectious diseases such as swine flu. But to argue that society is overreacting to coronavirus, based on the number of cases and deaths from swine flu in 2009, is shortsighted. It's much too early to know what the toll will be from coronavirus. Surely we can all agree, though, that the goal is to minimize the number of people who contract coronavirus. And if the much more widespread and aggressive precautions due to coronavirus help contribute to a final tally that's lower than that of swine flu, we will have reason to be thankful for the temporary frustrations.

None of which is to say that we need to panic, or to indulge in selfish behavior.

Although it's an example more humorous than potentially dangerous, the recent run on toilet paper illustrates how hysteria can become a sort of chain reaction. Had people acted more modestly — buying one or two extra packages rather than stuffing their shopping carts — the current shortages might not have happened. After all, there's no reason to believe that our daily need for toilet paper has suddenly skyrocketed, nor is there any indication that factories' capacity to produce the product has simultaneously plummeted. The empty shelves reflect the triumph of perception over reality.

We would do well to think not only about what has changed so rapidly and dramatically in our lives, but about what has not.

On Sunday morning, as late winter snow flurries briefly whitened Baker City, grocery store parking lots had plenty of empty spaces, and the shelves, with a few exceptions (rice has been especially popular, among edible items), were well-stocked with merchandise.

Water flowed from our faucets. The police and fire departments were ready to respond to emergencies as always. The hospital was open. So were most businesses.

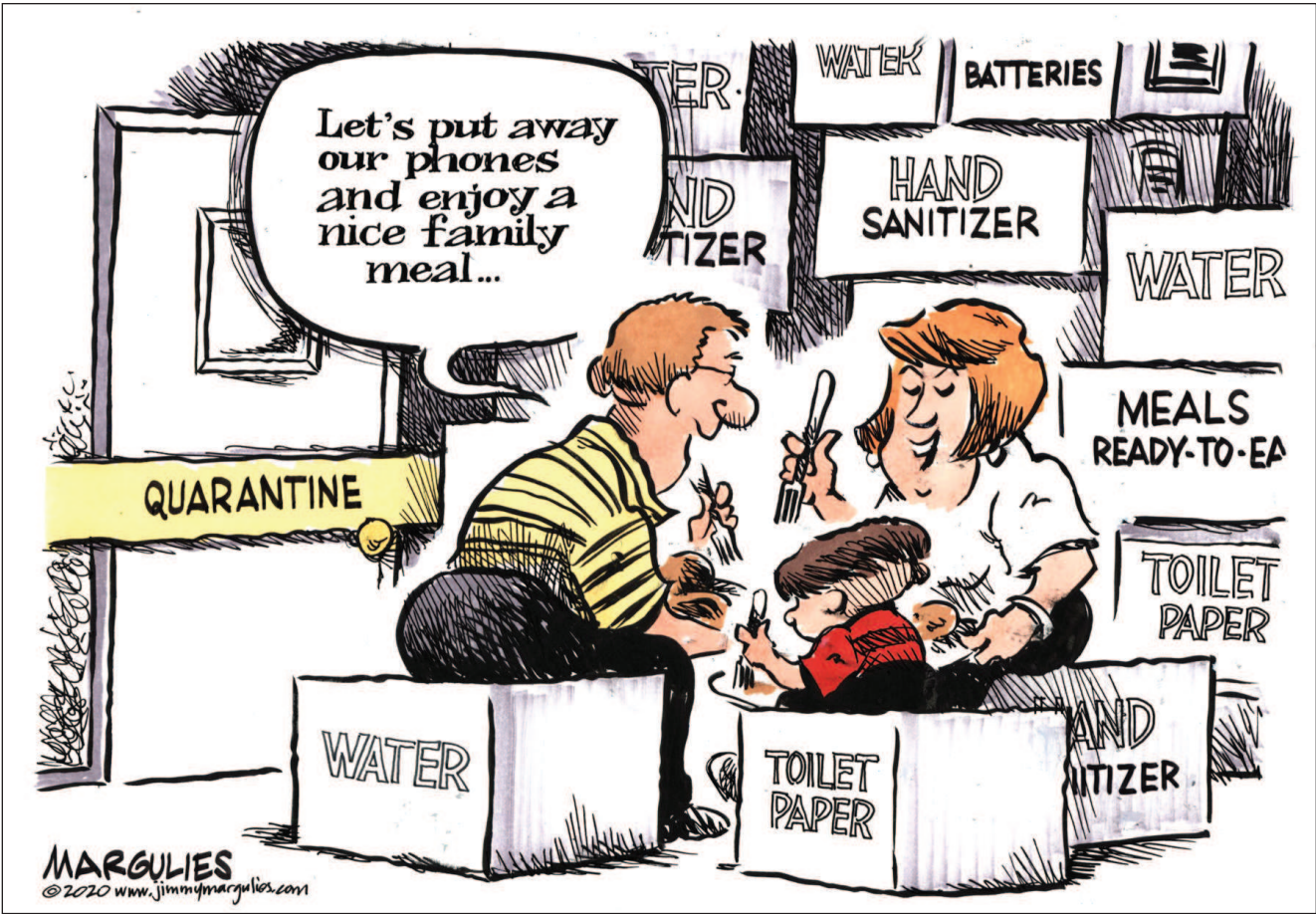
It's among the more cloying of cliches to say, in response to any crisis, that "we'll get through this together." But cliches attain their status because, most generally, they're grounded in truth.

And so it almost certainly will be with coronavirus.

A message from Baker County Sheriff Travis Ash, posted on the Sheriff's Office's Facebook page, is a measured and wise response to the situation. "Let's do what Baker County does best and work together," Ash wrote. "It is now that we need to be understanding, compassionate, remain calm and help keep this pandemic in perspective."

We all must decide for ourselves, of course, how we will change our personal habits during this crisis. But even as we wait, with understandable anxiety, to see what will happen, let's not allow our concern to lead us into rash and unnecessary actions, or to forget that what enriches our lives is our relationships with our family and friends.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Trump's speech not reassuring

NOAH SMITH

quickly when the danger is over. This is going to cost a lot more than \$50 billion, but it will be worth it in terms of economic growth and public health.

There were two very important emergency measures that Trump left out of his speech: paid sick leave, and expanded medical services.

Paid sick leave is a crucial tool for stopping the spread of the virus. If people have to choose between going to work with coronavirus and being unable to pay their bills, many will choose to work, where they'll infect their coworkers, making the epidemic much worse.

It's also important for helping low-income workers avoid economic devastation. As economist Gray Kimbrough has noted, workers at the lower end of the wage distribution tend to have less access to sick leave:

Without paid sick leave, low-wage workers who choose to stay home will fall behind on rent, miss car or credit-card payments or even be unable to buy food. The plan being put forth by Democrats in Congress includes paid sick leave; Trump was widely expected to include it in his proposals, but he left it out.

Trump also neglected measures that would directly attack the epidemic. Fixing the country's woeful testing situation is job No. 1, and Trump's earlier \$8.3 billion measure is utterly inadequate. The president should have promised more money, as well as streamlining regulations that hamper testing across the country. The U.S. should be approving and purchasing foreign test kits and materials while allowing labs across the country to make and use their own tests. And wherever possible, the government should be footing the bill.

But testing alone won't be enough; a huge number of Americans probably

will need hospitalization. But unless the government takes drastic steps, the hospitals are going to overflow. Although the U.S. is a rich country, it doesn't do much of its health care in hospitals; as a result, it has fewer beds relative to its population than most other countries struck by the pandemic.

This normally isn't a problem, but if coronavirus patients start to overwhelm hospitals, as has happened in Italy, it will quickly become catastrophic. Death rates will rise, and infection rates may also increase as surplus patients are cared for by unprotected family members instead of professionals.

To head off this disaster, the U.S. must immediately spend on constructing makeshift hospitals and hiring and training more medical workers. The U.S. may be unable to match China's speed, where a new hospital was reportedly built in just 10 days. But if it starts now, the government can expand capacity substantially. Furthermore, the government should pay for all coronavirus-related hospitalization costs.

These emergency measures will cost a lot of money, but with U.S. government borrowing costs at or near historic lows, the extra debt will be cheap to finance. And the spending will act as fiscal stimulus that buoys the flagging economy. The health and safety of the public is the government's foremost duty. Trump needs to do much more than he's doing. He needs to support and sign the Democrats' plan to provide paid leave and other economic supports, and he needs to vastly expand both testing and hospital capacity. The U.S. is running out of time.

Noah Smith is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist. He was an assistant professor of finance at Stony Brook University, and he blogs at Noahpinion.

OTHER VIEWS

Editorial from The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette:

If it's on Facebook, it must be true. Right? Wrong. Even though the social media giant has said it's taking steps to monitor fake news stories, the proliferation of such stories makes it unlikely they'll be squelched.

Older Americans may be more vulnerable to accepting fake news as fact and sharing that false or misleading article.

A 2019 study showed fake news is more likely to be shared by older Americans on Facebook than younger counterparts. Older Americans vote more often than younger people, so the impact of false news is magnified when it's election time.

Most fake news is easy to spot, with the right tools. Senior centers, community centers and libraries would do a great service by offering regular courses on spotting fake news.

In Allegheny County, such courses have been offered in the past, and with a presidential election com-

ing up, now is the time to work on eradicating the influence of fake news. Several websites also offer tips on spotting fake news, so if a class isn't available, people should educate themselves.

The 2019 study examining the sharing of false news stories on Facebook was published in the journal Science Advances. It found that Facebook users age 65 and older shared fake news about seven times more than those under 29. Those numbers almost certainly extrapolates to other social media sites, although Facebook is the favorite site of older social media users.

For purposes of the study, fake news was defined as false or misleading content "dressed up" to look like a news article.

There may be another reason younger users don't share as much fake news on Facebook. Facebook has been losing younger users who find other social media more to their tastes, sites such as Snapchat and

Instagram.

The Harvard Summer School website has a page of tips for spotting a fake news story. It includes links to several fact-checking sites. A quick trip to www.Snopes.com can also check a specific story. Many stories sound plausible or contain half truths. Snopes can debunk them.

No matter which candidates someone supports, votes influenced by fake news are a danger. Pennsylvania's 2016 presidential vote was close, with President Donald Trump winning the state by just over 44,000 votes out of more than 6 million cast.

People also should be aware of how their own biases affect the likelihood that they'll accept a false news story as the truth simply because they agree with it.

It's important that these courses be made available on a regular basis.

Make good decisions at the ballot box and when you're sharing stories on Facebook and other social media sites. Learn to spot fake news.