

2022

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Online ISSN: 2643-7759

Recommended Citation

Katyayani Suhrud, *Archiving the Pandemic: What it has Meant to Chronicle What we Wish to Forget*, 16 FIU L. Rev. 177 (2021).
DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.25148/lawrev.16.1.13>

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ARCHIVING THE PANDEMIC: WHAT IT HAS MEANT TO CHRONICLE WHAT WE WISH TO FORGET

Katyayani Suhrud*

As March was coming to an end, what was promising to be quite a fun semester was abruptly cut off by the pandemic. I had just been home for an extended Holi break and returned feeling rejuvenated, happy, with a few new things, and with a full wallet. Before any of this could be enjoyed, I had to be packed off again. I came back cranky and disconcerted, with three pairs of nightclothes and mentally with just one foot through the door. I was so sure that the world was overreacting, and this would be but a minor inconvenience in my life.

Soon my illusions started unravelling. I realized that we were indeed living through times that warranted all this attention—if not more. I also became tired of being irritable and knew very well that my otherwise generous family would not tolerate it for more than a few days. As I look back, March, April, and May are now a blur to me, but I remember reading the news incessantly, keeping a track of the number of new cases, recoveries, and deaths. For those months, I looked at the pandemic as an aberration from my life. It felt like someone took away all this time from my life without asking for my permission. It felt like a phase, a dark time that would eventually pass and my life as I knew it would be handed back to me. This tendency to see what was very much my life—as not my life—wasn't very useful. We tend to see several parts of our lives as preparatory and transient ones. They have to be lived well so that what is to come can be truly enjoyed. In doing this, we forget that the now was once waited and hoped for as well. School is to be finished well so that college can be enjoyed, college is to be taken seriously so that another degree can be enjoyed, and that degree is to be worked hard at so that a life can be built with its foundation. Living in anticipation of a better future is necessary, but sometimes it can make the present day a tiring one. I found myself getting tired of hating my life in lockdown so much because I didn't see it ending anytime soon, and I wasn't used to having such loathing for my now. I decided that if I wanted to be happier, for my sake and for the sake of people around me, I had to start being a little more observant and alert to my life then and there rather than cursing it and dreaming about my impending freedom.

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Having decided to do that, I did the one thing I tend to do when I feel that my day is worth documenting, for whatever reason, good or bad—I started maintaining a journal. I didn't, until the pandemic, tend to document angry or sad days. I wrote about things that excited me, that were new, that were happy, and that I wanted to cherish and come back to. The pandemic was anything but this. Having said that, life wasn't without its small pleasures. I became less lost in the kitchen, I dusted, washed, and folded. I got closer to friends over late night phone calls and had very repetitive conversations with people around me. Even though it felt like my days were stuck in this never-ending loop of an exhausting routine, every night I wrote something different. I was wearing the same clothes every other day, drinking the same tea or coffee from the same mug, sitting on the same chair, at the same time, with the same company, but still no two days seem alike if only my written word is to be relied upon. Writing made me feel like I had control over something, like my life could have meaning if I chose to give it meaning and that this experience, this unique moment in history, however frustrating and destructive, was worth documenting.

Most people around me were also documenting their pandemic. The only difference is that theirs was primarily digital and mine was on paper. The beauty of a picture is that it says a lot without forcing you to hunt for the right words. It gives you a voice without making you reckon with language. Especially at a time when certain words have shed some of their original meaning and impact due to overuse, it is often harder than one might expect to express oneself. Pictures when used over and over again become iconic rather than redundant. If powerful enough, they can even take you back to the time you first viewed it, what you thought, what the world was, and who you were. An Instagram story every day of the blue mug I drank from at around 5:00 p.m. every evening for months on end would not have been an orchestrated reality. You would have felt the rut and the routine with me, knowing fully well what it felt like because you would have had one of your own. Having chosen to use words instead, it is my responsibility to walk you through this piece and hope that we reach a similar destination. It seems to me that anything semiotic might have been kinder to me than anything linguistic, but how can I wish to be understood before I have made myself clear to myself? And the only way in which I could do that was to write, first for myself and then, for you.

A recurrent thought I had was that there was something very humbling and uniting about the pandemic. People with whom I had very little in common were using very similar words to describe their days. I kept wanting to know more about the lives other people were living, but after a while, they either became tired of talking about the pandemic or didn't have different things to say. The only reason why I didn't get annoyed with questions about

how I was doing was that every night when I wrote, I could tell that even though I felt I was doing pretty much the same, something new was definitely happening. This desire to know about other people's lockdowns in detail remained unfulfilled to a large extent because I really didn't want to prod or ask questions to friends and family. It was and continues to be a tough time in all our lives and too much interest seemed both unwanted and unwarranted.

Having lived with an archivist all my life, I have been told enough about the importance of the written or spoken word from a time long gone. I knew that at some point, people all over the world would put together archives of this time. I too had been maintaining a very personal one for no reason other than to maintain present sanity, although its value in the future was not lost on me. Archiving had seemed tedious and studious to me, something that required a lot of patience and the need to know about obscure things that were done or said in the past. I took it seriously, no doubt, but was convinced that people with a fondness for things like footnotes were best suited to handle it. Despite these misplaced notions I had about archives and archivists, when I received an email inviting applications to help put together an archive of the pandemic for Jindal Global University (JGU) (where I am a law student), it seemed as if this was what I had been waiting for since the day I started maintaining my own pandemic journals. My curiosity about other people's experiences of the pandemic seemed to have found legitimacy.

As I made notes before my interview, I wrote that I felt equipped to be a part of this archive because I myself was rejuvenated and had the capacity to engage with the pandemic in a thorough, everyday manner. Having written my own thoughts every single night, I could only begin to imagine what it would mean to archive the thoughts, experiences, and feelings of the many different people associated with JGU. I was excited for both what we were doing and the fact that I had something to do in the first place. It was a privilege to have the time, energy, ability and resources to create an archive of the pandemic. In a country like India, differences and disparities that we always knew existed had become scathingly apparent during lockdown. It had forced us to reckon with who we were as a country and as a people on a daily basis. The archive gave me the opportunity to listen and to document voices other than my own, which is all I could do to preserve what the lockdown had meant and what it had revealed to us about ourselves.

During the training session, I realized that most archives were created once the time or event that was being archived had passed. The archive was rarely created as the archivist herself lived through that moment. In preserving some stories rather than others, we were undertaking a process of selection while striving to write as just a history as possible. My notes from that session say that I am not creating the archive for my voice to become

dominant, and this is the ethos that I proceeded with. The initial excitement with which I had applied remained but caution had crept in. I was engaging with the pandemic in a way that not many people were, and this would make it an even stranger experience than it already was.

I was primarily supposed to conduct interviews of faculty and students to begin with, and this had been my main attraction to the archive. Collecting and categorizing newspaper articles (about the availability, sale, and consumption of alcohol and domestic work during the lockdown), as important as it was, tended to get repetitive, and the prospect of finally listening to what people had to say about the pandemic gave me something to look forward to. I had a list of questions and had also conducted a mock interview beforehand, but I have to admit that I started conducting them feeling cocky and not quite gauging what that experience was going to be like. I had to ask the questions, one after another, letting people meander but never too far so as to accommodate each interview within around an hour and generally remain alert and conscious of what was being said. It seemed easy enough to me, and I wouldn't quite call it tough even today. It was like a trance, and I felt like nobody around me was in it. All of us were living through the pandemic, but we were mostly living in our own heads, not in other people's. The interviews made complete strangers open up to me and although I should have, I wasn't expecting that. Medical histories, family frustrations, longing for a partner far away, anxieties and fears about the future, listlessness, anger, little joys, baking, painting, reading, "Netflixing," exercising, working, procrastinating, household chores, cutting hair at home... a lot was spoken about. Despite all that I had done to equip myself before the interviews, I often felt unprepared and was caught off guard when someone said something particularly unexpected or personal.

Each interview lasted for about an hour, and I often felt drained by the end. I made sure that I had showered and eaten before each, or at least I tried to, but this didn't always happen. I sat at my desk, hoping that my Wi-Fi would hold up. I tried to sound amiable and comforting but then became uncomfortable myself when someone felt comfortable enough to share very intimate thoughts and details. I knew some of the people who had agreed to be interviewed but with the exception of one, none of them were more than acquaintances and here they were, saying things that they never would have said to me had this archive not been created. I realized that this was the job, that these questions had to be asked, and these people knew that they didn't have to answer even one of them. The questions were not intrusive or pushy, but the answers that they invoked sometimes revealed thoughts and emotions that my question had not probed. Knowing fully well that the people I interviewed had agreed to be a part of the archive and had signed a detailed consent form beforehand, I still felt like I was intruding and like I had an

insight into someone's existence which I shouldn't have had. I managed to stay fairly detached, but what I heard stayed with me.

Having the voices of strangers far away in my head meant that I was not as cognizant or responsive to the voices immediately around me. My parents had started working (not just from home) again, often for the entire day. They came back tired, expecting a fully functional person capable of conversation, which I wasn't always able to be. As I became more sensitive to what I heard during the interviews, I felt like I had less mental space for those that I lived or shared a life with. I didn't want to talk to friends as much as I used to. Care and empathy were used up in that one hour, even though I barely contributed to the conversation (because it wasn't a conversation, it was an interview). Had I been talking to someone I knew or had the conversation been regular and not on a recorded call, I know that I would've said something to express empathy and solidarity. While the person I was interviewing also knew that we were all in this together, there wasn't much scope for me to remind them of this. I wanted to keep my contribution to the interview to the bare minimum. The rhythm that I settled into was of asking the questions and trying to make the other person feel comfortable in answering them in whichever way they chose. If I sensed angst in their tone or could tell that they were having a particularly rough time, I also had to remain aware of time constraints and the other questions that I had to ask. Polite ways of bringing them back to another question without delving too much on the previous one also seemed insensitive and obtuse at times. When someone spoke about trouble at home, I couldn't say much more than "hmm" or "okay" or "go on." I had to remind myself that I was not there to be their confidant but to be an unobtrusive and thorough interviewer. I also felt like I was thinking too much about abstractions such as empathy and comfort and it was doing me no good. When I wasn't trying to be as just as possible with dividing up my mental space to give to the archive, friends, family and myself, I was thinking about this division and the parameters that I based these decisions on. Very intangible things took over a large part of my brain and that constant back and forth that I had, mostly with myself, was something I wished I could get rid of.

My personal pandemic journals don't go into too many details about my experience of taking these interviews, which I knew had to be kept confidential. At the most, I mention something funny, unexpected or unusual that someone said or how tired I was after it. One interview in particular was a breeze and the reason, I thought, was that the person had clearly either written or thought about himself in relation to the pandemic in detail. He was fairly together in his head even about things that were falling apart. Words didn't have to be hunted for, thoughts were articulate and clear, even ones that were uncomfortable. It was after this interview that I realized that for

most, this was the first time someone had taken such pointed, concentrated, and single-minded interest in their experience of the pandemic. Some of the questions really made them think, and this hour spent talking about the pandemic to a stranger over a recorded call actually came as a relief for some. I received messages telling me that they felt much better after the interview, they got things off their chest that they didn't even know were there, and the most memorable of all, that this was like an unpaid therapy session.

The interviews can never be about the interviewer—or at least they shouldn't be. An archive is not a finished product, and clear signs of authorship or creation can direct attention and interest to places where it is often uncalled for. I am glad that I was on this side of the archive. Had someone, even these same set of people, asked for my interview, I would have probably declined. Having said that, it annoyed me however rarely, that the people I was interviewing seemed to forget that I too was living in lockdown. I too had gone through similar moments of denial, grudging acceptance, and anxiety. But then, how and why were they supposed to think about the voice on the other end? They had kindly agreed to share a part of themselves and open up about their lives to me and I was grateful for this trust. They were being generous with their time, energy and most importantly with their thoughts. The most they could give to me was their honesty, and I was grateful that they had agreed to answer questions, some of them personal, knowing fully well that their words would be examined and assessed in the years to come. I still don't know what more I wanted in return.

The interviews began and ended formally with rehearsed disclaimers and thank-yous. I never wanted to make even a minute of any interview about myself, but after especially heavy ones, I sometimes felt angry that this person had unburdened all that they wanted to on me and they got to feel lighter while I was often a snappy and cranky person by the end. I don't know what would have made me feel better, if anything at all. I had chosen to be a part of the archive and knew what I was getting into. I had been warned that archiving the pandemic while experiencing it would be unique and sometimes even unsettling. This is not to say that I regretted any of it, but I underestimated what it would mean to engage with COVID-19 in this manner for a sustained period of time. My friends and family were using work to escape the pandemic but my work was the pandemic. If I wanted to do it well, being partially committed to it was not an option.

Contrary to what I was expecting, my efforts to keep my presence in the interview to a minimum didn't always work. The only friend I interviewed caught me off guard by asking me a question as if we were chatting over tea and another acquaintance who had provided some much-needed company at a boring party not too long ago made me laugh uncontrollably, all the while

thinking how I was going to explain this sudden fit of giggles to my professors. Someone asked me if I could switch on my camera so that we could actually see each other after the interview was over and both of us smiled at how bizarre it was that he spoke for the first time about his family, loneliness, and the toll that the lockdown was taking on his mental health to someone he had spoken to maybe twice. Although living through and simultaneously archiving the pandemic got overwhelming sometimes, the interviews I conducted in July and August of 2020 only make me feel gratified today. The voice on the other end will now stop complaining having written a very self-indulgent essay about not being indulged.

The interviews were a lesson in listening, caring, and learning to be both present and invisible. When one of the interviewees told me that I had made him feel comfortable and safe to open up, I went back to listen to what it was that I had said only to discover that it was my silences and gentle nudges rather than words that had allowed him to speak with abandon. I realized that not only every word but also every silence would have consequences. I let myself laugh or sigh where it came to me naturally but held back on too many words. I found that if I used a certain word (I tried not to suggest or prompt), the other person tended to pick up on that and ended up using it to frame their answers, which I didn't want.

We archive a time or an event that we think is worth preserving and remembering. The irony is that the pandemic is anything but that. Most of us want to forget it and get on with our lives as soon as we can. COVID-19 has put priorities in perspective and has made us experience similar emotions regardless of our differences. It has been a time of introspection and has revealed a lot about us. Knowing that we want to forget the pandemic, the sense of fulfillment in having played a tiny role in remembering it has increased. Despite their disdain and frustrations, everyone I interviewed dared to hope. It is because of what they said to me that I began to appreciate things like having a desk to myself or a friend who lived close by or simply a healthy body free from comorbidities.

It took me longer than it should have to write this essay. I had wanted to for a while, but after the last interview, I mentally packed up that time of my lockdown and shoved it aside. Attempts to read Vinay Lal's "The Fury of COVID-19", Chinmay Tumbe's "The Age of Pandemics", Slavoj Žižek's "Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World" and Daniel Defoe's "A Journal of the Plague Year" weren't as successful as I had hoped.¹ I knew that reading

¹ VINAY LAL, *THE FURY OF COVID-19: THE POLITICS, HISTORIES AND UNREQUITTED LOVE OF THE CORONAVIRUS* (2020); CHINMAY TUMBE, *THE AGE OF PANDEMICS (1817–1920): HOW THEY SHAPED INDIA AND THE WORLD* (2020); SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, *PANDEMIC! COVID-19 SHAKES THE WORLD* (2020); DANIEL DEFOE, *A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR* (1886).

them would inform my own writing and put my experiences in perspective, but I managed to read only two of these books with great difficulty. The pandemic isn't something I am willing to look back on just yet. The restlessness and frustration are still fresh in my mind and haven't completely left me. I had no desire to educate myself about previous pandemics and how the world had coped with them because the world around me had just taken its first step towards recovery, with memories of suffering and loss still raw. I admired Chinmay Tumbe and Vinay Lal², who found it in themselves to conduct research and write about the very thing that had upturned their lives. Tumbe's book³, dedicated to Dr. H. Anil Kumar, the librarian of the Vikram Sarabhai Library at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad who succumbed to COVID-19 related complications, is a testament to what it would have meant to write about pandemics with one raging at your doorstep. Before I could tell my story to anybody else, I would have to tell it to myself, which was the lonely and exacting bit. Trying to remember what you also wish to forget creates a paradox that doesn't leave you until the last word has been written. I would have preferred to read these books at a time when I didn't have to sanitize the packages they arrived in. They are certainly not texts meant to be enjoyed, but they could have been read less grudgingly. Even as I near the end of this essay, I don't wish to sit with it or keep coming back to it. If what is done with love is done well, I can't help but be skeptical of an essay that I had to coax out of myself after reading books the titles of which dampened my mood. Having said that, I realize that it is a privilege to be able to tell a story which has dealt with the pandemic in perhaps the most sanitized and socially distanced way possible.

This archive, which has only just begun, has been exciting, scary, gratifying, and exciting again. Unexpected involvement in other people's lockdowns has made my own much better. My initial tendency to just trudge through the pandemic, leaving all alertness aside had to be unlearned. The archive made me sit up and take careful notice of this new way of life, other people's, and thus, also my own. Wanting this unpleasantness to be over didn't work out at all and in a happy surprise, looking closely at it rather than running away has made it better. Although JGU is but a dot in the larger scheme of things, I am convinced that archiving our experience as honestly and thoroughly as we can is significant and consequential. With the resources and ability to tell and preserve our stories, we must talk, listen, and document

² CHINMAY TUMBE, *THE AGE OF PANDEMICS (1817–1920): HOW THEY SHAPED INDIA AND THE WORLD* (2020); VINAY LAL, *THE FURY OF COVID-19: THE POLITICS, HISTORIES AND UNREQUITTED LOVE OF THE CORONAVIRUS* (2020).

³ CHINMAY TUMBE, *THE AGE OF PANDEMICS (1817–1920): HOW THEY SHAPED INDIA AND THE WORLD* (2020).

thoughts that are both fleeting and omnipresent so that when all this is over, we can finally sit back, look back, and begin to understand what we just survived.