An Organisation for Promoting
Understanding of Society

International Listening Posts report: The World at the Dawn of 2020

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On or around 8 January 2020, 22 Listening Posts were conducted in 18 countries around the world: Argentina, Brazil, Canada (2), Chile, Denmark, Faroe Islands, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy (4), Poland, Serbia, South Africa, Spain, Taiwan, Turkey and UK. This report synthesizes the reports of the Listening Posts and extracts general themes and patterns.

At the Dawn of 2020 - the central theme of the International Listening Post is 'crisis'. As this report documents, crises may erupt in many different shapes and forms but they are erupting. It may be the case that crises occur when existing systems are unable to keep up with the pace of change.

Another theme that emerged is concerned with 'identity'. We are engaged in a constant struggle to make sense of the world. These struggles determine the stories we tell about ourselves and shape our identities. Identities are not static, however, and must be re-evaluated in response to changing circumstances.

Finally, the third theme that we chose to highlight was that of 'media and technology'. Technology appears to underpin many of the changes we are seeing in society and forces us to confront ourselves (redefining our identities) or else face crises.

THEME 1: Crisis

We see 'crisis' in many of the reports, but they each have different shapes and dimensions.

In Australia, the **climate crisis** was the sole preoccupation, understandably so, as at the time of the Listening Post large parts of the country were on fire. In fact, climate concerns were reported in many countries (UK, Ireland, Poland, Denmark[1]). The climate crisis demands that we engage with extremely difficult emotions, such as fear, grief and anger (Australia), guilt and shame (Ireland) and despair (UK) but has the potential to unite the citizens of the world around a common cause (Denmark).

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[1] Countries in brackets are examples, all countries have been included in the analysis.

In other parts of the world, the climate crisis was not mentioned at all. It should be expected that different countries are preoccupied with different crises. In Chile, for example, the country was felt to be on the brink of 'internal war' after a three-month period of civil unrest had descended into a 'spiral of violence'. Here, anger and hostility was felt to be directed towards the government over its perceived failure to address economic inequality and social injustice and, simultaneously, the protestors for failing to allow the government to function.

Elsewhere in the world, similar feelings of frustration and anger towards the government were reported, for example, in Turkey (where the refugee crisis was a major preoccupation) and Taiwan, where the country is coming under extreme political pressure from its neighbours. However, in some parts of the world it is at least acknowledgement that we the people have also failed to take up our roles as active citizens and are, therefore, in some way responsible (Australia, UK, Ireland).

In some countries, we see out of crises a wish to relate to others, enthusiasm to be engaged with society in spite of existing differences and an attempt to consider historical social traumas, the memory of which is a heritage of valuable experiences that can strengthen the bonds of a community (UK, Italy, Chile). We also see strong expressions of a desire to achieve 'social justice' (Chile, Brazil). This move towards social justice is also related to a crisis of conscience where inequality and exclusion are increasingly viewed as obstacles to social well-being (Chile, Argentina). There is a longing for social institutions which could act as vehicles of socioeconomic mobility and poverty reduction, since historic ones such as education are felt as diminished (Brazil).

Hypothesis

A powerful undercurrent of all these crises is a preoccupation with reaching the 'point of no return' in terms of 'social disintegration', a 'deadly collision course' (Faroe Islands), a point where communication between different perspectives would become impossible and chaos would ensue (South Africa). In that sense, the crisis is characterized by the fear of social fragmentation linked with the Listening Post members' own participation in the global economic system as, by and large, members of the middle class, and in that sense we witness a representation of the social struggle between the privileged and the underprivileged and the impact of that struggle on the middle classes which find themselves falling into the 'caesura' (Italy) that separates the two. Thus this "middle" part of society finds itself oscillating between the position of acquiring 'social conscience' and being overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, isolation, apathy, and the fear of imminent violence from either side, top and/or bottom.

THEME 2: Identity

We also see concerns around "identity" in many of the reports. These concerns may be characterized as an 'identity crisis'.

In many countries, it seems that sharing common understanding and finding common solutions to common problems is felt to be increasingly difficult. Therefore, societies may be confronted with a tendency to overstress differences and identities and return to primary groups of refer-

ence in search for belonging and a sense of identity (Brazil). If larger, collective identities are felt to be almost impossible to achieve, social action feels even less likely.

Nevertheless, it seems that people express the need for community and *at the same time* the desire to be a unique individual; there is a desire to be both at the same time (Finland).

Differences between political (UK) and religious beliefs (Poland) or ethnic status (Turkey), social status (Chile), customs, heritage, and lifestyles are often experienced as irreconcilable, leading to smaller group identities built in a defensive position of self-preservation and isolation. As a consequence, individuals may feel responsible for their own tribes and not much else (Germany, Poland). What follows is a social structure made up of many small groups, fragmented and isolated from each other (Italy).

In some countries, we mourn the loss – or lament the failure of – institutions like the church or a political party or a popular newsreader, around which we built our identities – sometimes 'for', sometimes 'against' (Ireland). When those institutions are no longer felt to be relevant, we are faced with the task of redefining our own identities, either as individuals or as members of emerging communities.

We also see reports of young people struggling at an age when their identities have yet to be fully formed (UK, Poland). In the 'school strikes' movement young people are defining their identities in response to the climate crisis. Meanwhile, at the other end of the life cycle there is evidence that within the older generations, some are beginning to re-evaluate their own identities in light of their perceived failure to act on the crises documented above (in particular the climate crisis) (Australia, Ireland, Faroe Islands).

In some societies a more comprehensive "us" does emerge; a space to hold different voices, open to the acceptance of differences (Canada, Taiwan).

Hypothesis

We live in a complex world and are facing an uncertain future. It seems we want to connect with each other and have a desire to share, but run the risk of overstressing identities and separating into niche relationships that struggle to inter-relate and co-exist. We may gain a certain degree of clarity as to 'who is who', but it remains unclear which 'us' will turn out to be the dangerous one (Poland). Meanwhile, traditional (real world) social networks are cut and with them the possibilities of growth and development diminish. Encouragingly, some people are able to re-examine their existing identities in response to changing times but it is a task that often involves significant emotional effort.

THEME 3: Media and Technology

A theme which is universally expressed in the Listening Posts is to do with "media and technology". This has good and bad parts, as well as many other inherent ambiguities.

All over the world, people are becoming disillusioned with mainstream media (Australia, UK) and turning to social media instead. As a consequence, we are arguably more vulnerable than ever

to misinformation and 'fake news'. One of the main areas of preoccupation and anxiety in this context seems to be a fear of losing agency as members of society (Denmark). Members feel digitally manipulated (Spain) and report themselves resisting against feeling numb, willingly staying in the dark – as if they were lobotomized (South Africa).

Furthermore, social media and technology is in many societies experienced as being intrusive and 'operating on steroids', leading to emotional, extreme or even false information. Many people experience social media to be dangerous, exposing and unforgiving, leading to anguish and emotional distress. As a consequence, real risks (and the associated alarm) are underestimated whilst imaginary fears, suspicions and insecurities intensify. Further, instead of doubting the news agencies, we are now much more likely to doubt each other, leading to an increase in hostility both online and in the real world (UK, Ireland).

The digital 'cloud' seems to be clouding our intellect and our ability to connect with the world around us. Members of society can access an immense amount of information (news, social media, educational content), yet they find themselves unable to meaningfully connect with any of it. Further, we now have an increased awareness of the 'social bubble'. News feeds present us with information that is likely to reinforce our existing world views, meaning we are at risk of becoming ever more isolated from each other, polarized – fragmented even – and at real or imagined risk of complete disintegration both within our societies and within ourselves.

It seems that in a hyper-connected digital world, societies are struggling with lack of human contact (loneliness, isolation, dehumanization of relationships) (Denmark, Spain).

Nevertheless, social media has also enabled new movements and responsibility, especially by young people. It is possible to converse thoughtfully with people from all around the world using webcam technology and instant messaging services. It is possible to connect with people who share a common interest, if not a common geographic location. It is possible to organize mass movements of popular resistance against failed and corrupt institutions, as we have seen with the school strikes movement, Extinction Rebellion, the 'Gillet Jaunes' in France and the pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong.

Hypothesis

We often lament the prevalence of technology in our lives. We seem to be growing more doubtful and suspicious of each other as we interact online. We wonder what hope do we have of establishing a common narrative, when we cannot even share common perceptions about simple day to day things, like the weather, for instance (Ireland). The social bubble is felt to be a personal bubble too, when individuals are perceived to be more engaged with their phones than with each other. We are 'hyper-connected', but lonely. In the end we don't want to be digital "bits" in a cyberspace, but desire to be something more akin to 'Lego bricks' that fit in a physical space (Italy). We are searching for a sense of 'real world' belonging and, perhaps, new activist movements fulfil that desire in a digital age.

SUMMING UP

Even in a constantly changing world we can find directions and meanings, opposites can coexist if we are able to leave behind the logic of polarization. We see new possibilities:

"If I can't own my shame and my guilt, I push down those who confront me … only by acknowledging this can I act responsibly" (Ireland). "Humanity is developing and there is hope" (Finland).