

What COVID diaries have in common with Samuel Pepys' 17th-century plague diaries

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People keep diaries for all sorts of reasons—to record events, work through difficult situations, or manage [stress](#) and [trauma](#). The ongoing COVID inquiry shows diaries also have important political and historic

significance. The UK's former chief scientific adviser Patrick Vallance's [diaries](#) have been a key source of evidence, exposing the chaos within government at the time.

In my Ph.D. research, I've been exploring the COVID diaries of ordinary people, as well as diaries kept during the Great Plague of London in 1665-66. Though centuries apart, these diaries are full of insight into how people react to crises, and have surprising similarities.

From the first lockdown in March 2020, [media outlets](#), archive centers and researchers encouraged people to record their pandemic experiences. Even BBC children's entertainer [Mr. Tumble](#) urged young viewers to start a diary.

This has resulted in a large number of COVID diaries being made available in archive collections around the UK, plus many more online in the form of blogs or social media. I've been looking specifically at 13 COVID diaries donated to the Borthwick Institute for Archives and the East Riding Archives, both in Yorkshire. Most were originally private documents, offering a more spontaneous, honest and intimate portrayal of pandemic experiences than their online counterparts.

Diaries written during the Great Plague are not so numerous. Of the few available, the most valuable is that of naval administrator Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), whose exceptionally detailed and candid journals form by far the most comprehensive firsthand account of plague-stricken London.

I have been reading Pepys's diaries alongside the modern COVID diaries and have been struck by the common themes in how people navigated their pandemic experiences.

Recording statistics

Throughout the COVID pandemic, statistics of cases and deaths were everywhere and were key to how we judged the impact of the virus. As diarist JF wrote on June 5, 2020, "It was time to watch the coronavirus update, and I was shocked to find that over 40,000 people have now died from the disease in this country, and it's not over yet!"

Relatively [accurate information](#) was also widely circulated in 17th-century London via the "bills of mortality"—weekly lists of deaths according to cause and location. Pepys wrote on September 7, 1665: "Sent for the Weekely Bill and find 8252 dead in all, and of them, 6978 of the plague—which is a most dreadful Number—and shows reason to fear that the plague hath got that hold that it will yet continue among us."

All of the modern and historical diaries I have looked at include these statistics—some sparingly, others with meticulous regularity.

The blame game

As cases rose, restrictions were enforced, and the effects of plague and COVID loomed large in the lives of our diarists, narratives shifted to confusion and blame. Pepys was largely sympathetic to the government's handling of the plague and, in February 1666, criticized those who flouted the rules and endangered others:

"In the height of it, how bold people there were to go in sport to one another's burials. And in spite to well people, would breathe in the faces ... of well people going by."

COVID diarists reacted to those who didn't follow guidelines in a very similar way, as DR wrote in March 2020:

"Not everyone is playing it very well, though, with panic-buying, one last

night at the pub and a mass exodus to the coast. Stupid and selfish in equal measure."

The response and actions of the UK government and individual members of parliament also afforded much attention. An anonymous diarist wrote in May 2020:

"People are being allowed out more, but the illness is still out there & there's no treatment or vaccine yet ... There are fewer deaths because of social distancing. If they let everyone get on with the 'new normal,' surely more people will get sick?"

Staying positive

A more optimistic theme to emerge in the diaries was the ability to find positivity amid the chaos. Pepys and modern diarists were thankful for the blessings of health, family and security. They praised those who went the extra mile to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on those around them, despite the risk to their own health. An entry from New Year's Eve in 1665 reads:

"My whole family hath been well all this while, and all my friends I know of, saving my aunt Bell, who is dead, and some children of my cozen Sarah's, of the plague ... yet, to our great joy, the town fills apace, and shops begin to open again. Pray God continue the plague's decrease!"

DW's diary from April 2020 expressed appreciation for time out in nature, as well as sympathy for others living in more difficult situations:

"It was lovely walking through the wood. The air was filled with birdsong. It made me realize how lucky I am to live in a village where I can walk from my front door into fields and woods along defined paths.

It must be awful to live ten floors up in a high-rise block with two children and not be allowed out except for once per day."

Comparing COVID with historical events such as [plague](#), [the Spanish flu epidemic](#) and the [second world war](#) was a core element of the pandemic narrative, and for a good reason. History connects.

It is easy to look around us and see the vast differences between the world we live in now and that which Pepys traversed almost 400 years ago.

But by exploring the innermost thoughts of people with an element of shared experience, we see that fundamental aspects of the human condition endure. When faced with uncertainty and upheaval, our instincts are to record, find answers, and reclaim joy.

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