Tackling the Corona Pandemic: Managing Nonknowledge in Political Decision-Making

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The corona crisis in 2020 has escalated in a way that no one could have predicted or been adequately prepared for, although the likelihood of similar pandemics has been estimated to be very high. The World Health Assembly (WHA), convened by the World Health Organization (WHO), surmised in 2011 that the outbreak of a new pandemic was inevitable and thus *predictably unpredictable*. Crisis management and security planning, including preparing for pandemics, are generally the legal obligations of state officials and often follow internationally shared standards (Walker and Cooper 2011; Rogers 2015). Yet, the incapability of many governments to tackle the crisis and COVID-19's wide-ranging global health, social and economic effects has reached a scale which can be best described as *unknown unknowns*. In the literature of ignorance, the characteristics of unknown unknowns or *nescience* that have traditionally been considered outside the scope of risk management can only be known in retrospect (Kerwin 1993; Gross 2019). The failure of corona pandemic prevention has revealed how poorly global manuals work when states face a cross-border global crisis, despite the enormous scale and speed of information systems worldwide. In particular, many democratic countries with well-functioning infrastructures, highly automated security systems, advanced healthcare and a wide range of experts have proved incapable of preventing the spread of the virus and the escalation of the global crisis. How can knowledge societies that are increasingly building their decision-making systems and national security on predictive analytics, artificial intelligence and automation be so completely confused about one virus that the arrival of which could not be predicted with instrument clusters or stopped by regulations? We assume that one reason that many decision-makers failed, despite massive efforts to manage risks and calculate probabilities, was their underdeveloped ability to deal with ignorance and nonknowledge.

In this chapter, we discuss how nonknowing has governed decision-making processes in the corona crisis and the kinds of practices policymakers resorted to when trying to manage epistemic conditions on nonknowing in decision-making. Integrating our previous conceptualisation on the temporality of nonknowledge in political decision-making (Parviainen, Koski and Torkkola 2021), we further advance this idea by examining the ways in which the Finnish Government during the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis dealt with nonknowing as a condition of crisis decision-making and learned to use it in their communication with citizens. We argue that, at the early stages of the pandemic, the decision-making of the Finnish Government was based largely on predictive modelling and scenarios. As knowledge anticipations and estimations are incomplete, the government publicly admitted that decisions had to be made while nonknowing. At the time of this writing, it was too early to say if conceding to ignorance belonged in some political scheme. We believe that acknowledging one's nonknowing in public is a credibility risk – especially for young female politicians.[1] In illustrating

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[1] When Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Social Democrat-led coalition took office in December 2019, she was the world's youngest sitting prime minister. The four other party leaders in the coalition are also women, most of them in their thirties.

our discussion with actions taken by press conferences (PCs) of the government, we consider how non-knowledge became an inevitable component of political decisions in crisis situations. Our epistemological approach highlights the complex assemblage of power, nonknowledge, temporality, relationality (especially amongst government, citizens and the media) and the imperative of speed in political decisions.

Politics as an arena of epistemic controversies

In politics, knowledge and ignorance have become increasingly contested issues. Democracies are expected to base their decision-making on expert knowledge, but this guarantees neither legitimacy nor consensus due to competing expert opinions. The 'post-truth' discussions and the rise of populistic movements in Europe and in the Americas have made it apparent that a substantial number of citizens deliberately question or simply dismiss expert knowledge, especially coming from public expert organisations (Davies and McGoey 2012; Moore 2017; Siles-Brügge 2019). The core principles of democracy where knowable citizens hold decision-makers accountable for their deeds with the assistance of the media as the fourth estate is no longer axiomatic, since political ignorance amongst citizens risks genuine accountability and even the future of democracy in some countries (Somin 2016).

Traditionally, politicians have liked to appear in public as all-knowing, but when facing more complex social and ecological problems, admitting one's ignorance cannot be avoided. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, resilience has widely become a byword in crisis management and security planning (Walker and Cooper 2011). As a new security paradigm, resilience stems from a need to tackle complex and unforeseeable problems such as terrorism and pandemics as well as continually changing systems such as those related to climate change (Lin and Petersen 2013; Folke 2006). Resilience thinking as an epistemic attitude does not rule out nonknowing in political decision-making, but 'recognition of our ignorance' is treated as the basis of successful anticipation, experimentation and adaptive action (Walker and Cooper 2011, 146). However, we assume that the paradigm change presents politicians with the possibility of adopting a new kind of epistemic attitude for dealing with the crisis, a perspective we call 'epistemic humility'. By epistemic humility, we mean that actors acknowledge the limits of their knowledge in that unknown, uncertain, ambiguous and uncontrollable dimensions are accepted as an inevitable components of consideration (Parviainen and Lahikainen 2019).

Politics is here understood as a contesting activity, where decisions made and policies adopted are constantly questioned through active provocation and politicisation, which increasingly takes place as epistemic controversies both inside the decision-making arenas of government and parliament as well as in public communication directed towards citizens (Palonen 2006). That is, besides cabinet ministers in the contestation, it includes participating members of the parliamentary opposition, national and international expert organisations, individual experts and both traditional and social media. The decisions made are often compared with those of international reference groups such as the Scandinavian and European Union (EU) countries. From the perspective of cognitive and behavioural decision-making theory typical of political decision-making as a process, politicians are always partly concerned about their political future, which is one of the premises affecting knowledge processing and final choices (Mintz 2003; Ye 2007). Both knowledge and nonknowledge are used not only in implementing political decisions and justifying them in public, but also for creating room for national and international manoeuvres needed to take or stay in power.

In attempting to cope with crises in the past, numerous political operations have resulted in scandals or disasters when politicians have been unable to respond to uncertain information or nonknowledge, disinformation and experts' knowledge or their disagreements, or to face their own ignorance (Bovens and 't Hart 1996). During the corona pandemic, politicians have been forced to make urgent decisions under pressure while balancing between challenging options: protecting citizens' health or causing major social and economic difficulties through security measures. Part of the dilemma has been whether the chosen security measures are oversized, causing fundamental economic and social problems, or not sufficient enough, thus putting people's health at risk. During crisis situations, a transparent and democratic decision-making system can become paralysed when administrative chaos and pressure boil over due to a lack of (and inaccurate) knowledge, personal stress, controversies from parliamentary opposition, international reference groups and the media. For example, the pleading to acknowledge the urgency of hearing different groups of citizens can be neglected or the views of experts in different disciplines not taken into account when considering legislative initiatives. The increasing speed of events, constant flood of news and intensified social media activity, including the dissemination of conspiracy theories and disinformation, contribute to the creation of a special kind of epistemic matrix for the crisis that the government needs to take into consideration (Väliverronen et al. 2020).

Methods and materials

Our discussion on nonknowing is based on an analysis of PCs organised by the Finnish Government dealing with COVID-19 pandemic prevention measures from 27 February to 15 June of 2020. The government initially made its decisions on necessary recommendations for citizens on the grounds of the Contagious Diseases Act (CDA). After two weeks, the government together with the republic's president, after consulting different sector experts, decided to declare a state of emergency on 16 March, although incidences of the virus were still very low in Finland. The declaration made it possible to launch a process for applying even stronger restrictive measures in accordance with the Emergency Powers Act (EPA). By May, the strong restrictions had seemed to take effect and incidences were moderated. Therefore, enforcement of the EPA became noneligible, and measures were again taken based on the CDA. In addition, the government prepared for the anticipated 'second wave' of the pandemic by introducing an action plan called a 'hybrid strategy' during the research period. The necessary capacity for testing for the virus, tracking the contact network involved in the source of infection and establishing a quarantine protocol were implemented for continual pandemic prevention thereafter.

Our data consisted of the transcriptions of 40 PCs. The prime minister's office streamed the conferences online, and the material was restored and freely available on Finnish Government's website as well as on YouTube. The participants in the PCs were Prime Minister Sanna Marin's cabinet ministers, national authorities, various persons representing experts and the media. While addressing the public, the government focused on four main themes: (1) the virus and pandemic, (2) protecting citizens, especially the so-called risk groups, from contracting the disease, (3) securing health and intensive care capacity by slowing down the progress of epidemic and (4) strengthening the national economy after the crisis. We assumed that the government had begun to hold regular PCs and situation reports that were open to the media partly in an effort to fight against disinformation and conspiracy theories spread by some social media channels. Journalists were initially invited to PCs, and later remotely, but through the almost daily PCs, the government spoke directly to the citizens.

To achieve an overall understanding of the role of knowing and nonknowing, the transcriptions were first coded freely, concentrating on the 20 press conferences with PM Marin. Open coding produced

a total of 140 codes for knowledge (with 1,369 utterances) and 40 codes (with 344 utterances) for nonknowledge. The following analysis further explores the codes of nonknowledge. The analysis on decision-making was complemented by a self-evaluating report on events based on interviews of the core policymakers participating in decision-making ordered by the government and published as of the writing of this work (Deloitte 2021; Mörttinen 2021). Our aim was to discuss how ignorance and nonknowing crop up in both the decision-making process and in communication on pandemic prevention directed towards the citizens.

Taking advantage of the temporality of nonknowing

The rapid escalation of the pandemic proved both in Finland and in many other EU countries that they were completely inadequately prepared for the crisis, so the crisis started to turn from known unknown to unknown unknown. Evidence from decision-making theory dealing with political and organisational decision-making shows that human knowledge processing, both individually and collectively, is biased in a way that makes it extremely difficult to remain open to nonknowing. Decision-makers look for knowledge that confirms their earlier knowledge, are guilty of overconfidence regarding the limits of their cognitive frames and readily stop searching for alternative knowledge too early (Feduzi and Runde 2014; Weick and Sutcliffe 2015). In Europe, the threat of COVID-19 was first underestimated because few experts thought the virus would have a wide impact on public health in European countries. Healthcare experts' failure to estimate the spread of infection shows how difficult it has been to challenge practices of normality and identify the risks of the unknown, even when the threat of the infection was already concretised in Asian countries. Disagreement arose for various reasons; politicians were expected to respond to experts' views by reconciling their own and others' perceptions. According to the interviews of the core actors participating in managing the pandemic, they soon realised that security planning in Finland had focused too much on preparing for a military crisis (Deloitte 2021). Listing various forms of crises as pandemics in the EPA is not enough if the actual planning efforts do not take it into account.

At the time of this writing, the above-mentioned self-evaluations of policymakers on pandemic prevention in the spring suggested the incidence numbers would stay low compared with those of reference countries such as Scandinavian and EU countries. Thus far during the pandemic, this can be explained by two main things: the delayed arrival of the pandemic in Finland and the government managing to take anticipatory action in a timely manner (Deloitte 2021; Mörttinen 2021). The use of the EPA enabled the government to take strict epidemic preventive measures, such as a nearly total lockdown of the Uusimaa (Capital) municipality region for a limited time. Of all the measures used by the government during the research period, this was the one that was considered as violating most of the constitutional rights of Finnish citizens. When the lockdown was dissolved, PM Marin was able to admit that 'we simply could not yet predict what the course of the epidemic in Finland as a whole will be like', and that the decision-making was mostly based on modellings showing that the epidemic could get out of hand without restrictions on citizens' movements (Finnish Government 2020c). On the grounds of adhering to the EPA, the government made a series of decisions where policymakers could take timely actions according to increasing knowledge generated internationally and through the experiences of national health officials constantly preparing to update the decisions previously made.

Using Gross's (2019, 23) taxonomy, the temporality of nonknowing can be made more manageable in political decision-making for acting in accordance with assessments of whether unknowns are provisional or whether it may be impossible to eliminate them within a definable time period. For example, by adaptive management, decisions are made stepwise by integrating various monitoring systems for observing the consequences of the decisions made (Böschen et al. 2010; Beck and

Wehling 2011; Lin and Petersen 2013). Based on our previous study (Parviainen, Koski and Totkkola 2021), we propose that decision-making processes regarding nonknowing can contain various epistemic states, including, 'partly-known,' 'not-yet-known,' 'will-be-known,' 'unable-to-know' and 'unable-ever-to-know'. The temporality of nonknowledge does not point to mere knowledge gaps since the complex epistemic environment includes plenty of unknown variables, so finding out one thing can lead to a systemic change, instead of being an exercise in puzzle solving. For example, in the spring of 2020, the development of the corona virus vaccine was concerned with the epistemic state of 'not-yet-known' but 'will-be-known'. However, experts still cannot tell – they are yet 'unable-to-know' – whether the vaccine provides only temporary protection because viruses change rapidly. Another example is that, in the spring of 2020, there was conflicting evidence about using masks as a protection against the virus, but it was 'already-partly-known' that their benefits were considered to be greater than the disadvantages. Still, to date, the complete benefits of the use of masks remains 'unable-to-know' because of the difficulty of arranging experimental setups.

Anticipation is one of the key operations of dealing with *known unknowns* in security planning, where the future is made present by modelling, prognostic simulations, data mining and scenarios (Neisser and Runkel 2017). In politics, the language of probabilities and reasonableness allows policymakers to manage uncertainty and calibrate the 'degrees of certainty' in their own production of knowledge. Most probabilistic reasoning is based on experts' assessments; in this way, experts and advisors transform their ignorance into doubt and uncertainty (Aradau 2017). In crisis situations, this type of reasoning easily fails when experts – facing a new situation without any similar experiences – have difficulties estimating the scale of the crisis and the dynamics of its escalation. At the onset of the pandemic, scientific advisors were able to provide information on risks and uncertainties compared with those of previous pandemics. As Innerarity (2012), among others, has argued, the pluralisation of knowledge implies a weakening of its ability to command. Whereas some experts point to unknown unknowns and to the enduring 'unknowability' of complex causal interconnections, others assume that the relevant gaps in knowledge are specifiable and can be overcome within manageable time scales. Böschen et al. (2010) suggested that politicians and officials handle nonknowing according to different 'scientific cultures of nonknowledge'.

In their decision-making, the Finland Government leaned heavily towards decision-making based on the health authorities' expertise and on new knowledge about the virus emerging from countries where the pandemic had progressed further. In the early stages in February, when asked about the virus, pandemic and capacity of protective measures, the prime minister opened the door for the health authorities to explain what was known and what remained unknown (Finnish Government 2020a). When information about the virus was – and still is – constantly being updated, the temporality of nonknowing substantially affected the rhythms in which political decisions were made in managing the spread of COVID-19. Adopting a pragmatic attitude in their approach to handling the crisis, the Finnish Government emphasised timely intervention and the need to follow the epistemic chain of 'already-partly-known' 'not-yet-known', 'will-be-known' and 'unable-to-know' (Parviainen, Koski and Torkkola 2021). However, due to the slow pace of legislative and administrative work, it was difficult to coordinate political decisions with the daily updated information, so the epistemic constellation formed a complex system that needed constant reassessment of previous perceptions and decisions.

Governments and industries have traditionally preferred controlling orientation to nonknowledge; for example, NGOs rely on more complex orientation, which allows admitting more openly that there are systems that resist knowability and political planning (Böschen et al. 2010). It seems that the Finnish Government has managed to adopt a complex enough orientation for nonknowing and has so far unexpectedly managed to take actions while the situation is still 'partly-known' and 'not-yet-

known'. Even when establishing the COVID-19 coordination and operation centres for coordinating preventive actions and creating up-to-date information on crisis situations for decision-making, the government was opening epistemic processes to support decision-making, but, on the flip side, they underlined that 'there is still a lot we do not know about this virus, and every day the information is updated, that is, in this sense we have to live in uncertainty and make decisions also in the midst of uncertain information and, in part, incomplete information' (Finnish Government 2020b). We are not assuming that the politicians revealed all the decision-making situations where ignorance had a significant role, but they showed no signs of trying to totally hide their nonknowledge in public discussion either.

Maintaining citizens' crisis awareness

Compared with the EU, the government dissolved restrictions in Finland gradually and with great caution (Deloitte 2021). Nearly every time the government eased restrictions, it seemed to remind the public that there were still things that were not known about the virus, and that it would best for citizens to start getting used to changes: 'It is better that we all together start showing a positive attitude towards that we are no longer living in the world where things are as they used to be. We are going through a transformation into some kind of new normal where keeping distance of two meters can be part of daily life and society has to be arranged in a new way' (Finnish Government 2020d). In communicating the current 'the hybrid strategy', the government has applied resilience thinking, which has been accused of creating a kind of continuing state of emergency (Walker and Cooper 2011). Resilience can also indirectly fuel ignorance when problems caused by the emergency for the citizens are denied to create popular acceptance and submission to circumstances, such as is suggested to have happened after the Fukushima nuclear disaster (Rimbault 2019).

In the ongoing PCs, the government was consistently reminding, even after enforcement of the EPA and the state of emergency had ended, that there were still things which were not known and that people should stay 'humble' in the face of the out-of-control pandemic (Finnish Government 2020e). The government's persistence in publicly pleading nonknowing suggests to us that it might be a new means of managing crisis consciousness more suitable for complex, novel crises and hazards such as pandemics. As is known, in politics, there is a long history of using various external known unknowns in creating crisis consciousness amongst citizens and for carrying out authoritarian policy measures (Daase and Kessler 2007; Weise et al. 2008). Learning to communicate its insecurity and nonknowing through PCs, the government was able to moderate citizens' crisis awareness and increase citizens' accountability for preventing infections. Revealing one's own uncertainty could have been a factor in how credible the government's message was in the eyes of citizens. However, collective fear also easily depoliticises politics when citizens expect unity for the common cause. This seemed to be the case during the spring in Finland. The parliamentary opposition, consisting mostly of populist and conservative parties principally supportive of controlling means, had no appetite for questioning the consensus.

It is striking that the media are the primary actors insisting on justifications, addressing rumours spreading in social media and asking often for more definite knowledge than either the policymakers or the experts were capable of providing. This function naturally belongs to the public service role given to the media in Western democracies. They have a duty 'to keep a watchful eye' on powerholders, which because of the news competition between media culminate in blame games and political scandals (Gleason 1990, 61–62; Thompson 2000; Preston 2009). The most patronising decisions made by the government towards the citizens occurred in April 2020 when it rejected giving a clear mask recommendation, although representatives of the media persistently pointed out the international example set in several other countries. Due to contradictory opinions of the health

experts on the usefulness of masks in protecting laypeople, the government seemed to have locked itself into a state of nonknowing and resistance to any recommendations on masks (Mörttinen 2021). Only in August, after ordering a report on the scientific knowledge on the issue, did the government make a U-turn, which caused suspicion in the media and in the parliamentary opposition that nonknowing had been used to cover up the lack of masks and administrative purchasing skills to secure them in the international market.

Acting with caution and admitting points of nonknowing, the government adopted a proactive politicisation which might also have been related to avoiding future blame games and getting ready for the 'official inquiry' after the crisis (Boin and Hart 2003). Presumably, this course of action expanded its normally limited political playing field by providing opportunities to mitigate incorrect decisions. It seemed that, by adopting epistemic humility, the government had avoided overconfidence in negotiating its own epistemic leeway without giving up its own epistemic states and faculties. The crisis was a situation where both policymakers and citizens became aware of uncertainties concerning human existence, which created a favourable momentum for addressing various issues of nonknowing unavoidable in political decision-making that normally were kept outside of the public scene.

Conclusion

The data analysis shows that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, politicians have been in the position to make fast but prudent decisions to protect public health that inevitably cause turbulence in businesses, employment and people's livelihoods. Illustrating our discussion with formal announcements of the Finnish Government in PCs, we have suggested that Prime Minister Marin and her cabinet have developed a policy of epistemic humility that does not legitimate their decisions based on scientific knowledge but rather on the temporality of nonknowing. When information about the virus is constantly updated, the epistemic states of 'not-yet-known' or 'partly-known' substantially affect the rhythms in which political decisions are made in managing the spread of COVID-19. The special circumstances and requirements that concern the temporality, rhythm of decision-making and relationality establish the essential framework for futurity-oriented politicisation. We have also suggested that adopting the attitude of epistemic humanity can allow politicians to tolerate the state of non-knowing and develop reflective attitudes towards disagreement and openness to alternative views – in short, capabilities for handling complexity, confusion and uncertainty. Unexpectedly, the crisis seems to have made it easier for politicians and experts to admit in public that they are not omniscient and capable of controlling uncertainty. Made decisions are justified both in terms of knowledge and non-knowledge. Thus, nonknowing should not be denied but seen as a means of politicisation and creating political leeway in decision-making and crisis management. Nonknowing is ubiquitously present at different levels of the political decision-making that has attempted to tackle COVID-19, and this makes it apparent that decision-making has to be explored from the perspective of nonknowledge management.

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