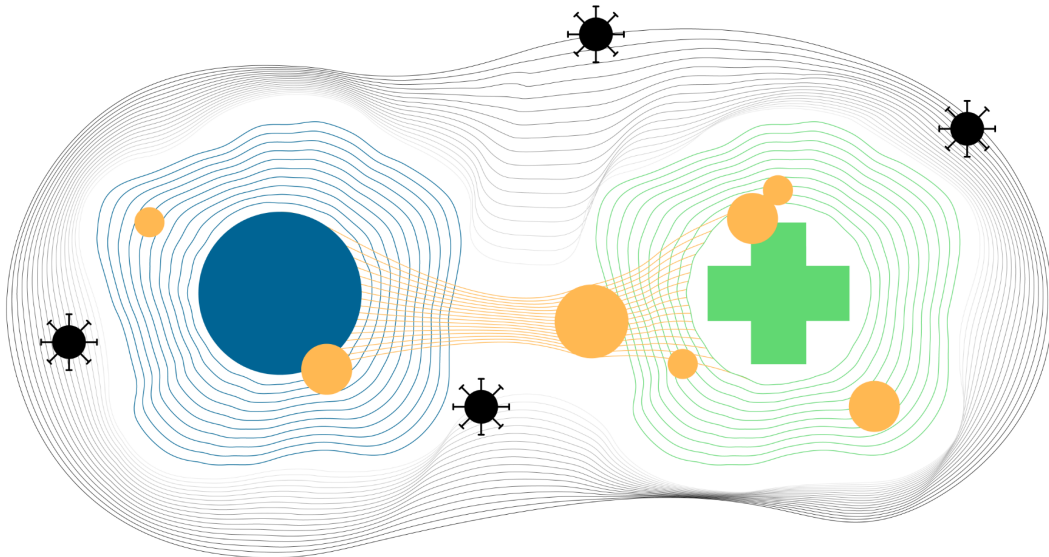




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FOUNDATION

Asymmetry and Tourism Policy in a 'No Normal' world



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The word asymmetry means a difference or lack of equivalence between objects or at the very least a perceived difference between them. These objects might be energy flows, waves, business cycles, warring factions (e.g. standing army v insurgents) or even elements in the outer heliosphere. What is important is that when applied conceptually, asymmetry concerns differences that make comparisons difficult. More importantly it confuses, even obscures, the nature of the relationship between the things, people and objects under the influence of that asymmetry. It creates a space where the what, why and how of how to intervene becomes problematic. What appears to be certain becomes uncertain and what seems real sometimes expresses itself as an alternative reality in time frames not always of our choosing. In short it creates levels of chaos, confusion and contradiction that challenge the articulation of effective policy that underpins robust decision making.

For the tourism sector globally, there are at the moment three forces in asymmetrical relationship with each other[1]. These three forces are: the idea of tourism as an economic good, an ongoing pandemic, the localized manifestations of the virus itself (because we can never be sure that what we are observing is comparable to what is manifested elsewhere) and the various institutionalized public health responses to the effects of the virus.

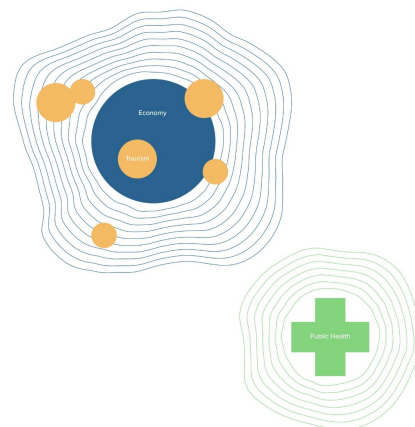


Figure 1. Diagram showing a pre-Covid model of the sphere of Economy including tourism and models of public good health.

As Figure 1 suggests, when seen as an economic good, tourism concerns itself with a fixation (even dependency) on ongoing growth. This is to ensure that the substantial investments that have been made can be sustained and in particular that the low cost/high volume around which it has recently been designed can continue. On the other hand, nation state driven, public health interest regimes, driven by epidemiological theories seek to contain transmissions, look to quarantine travelers as required, work to promote vaccination against the many variants and understandably fixate on ensuring that there is sufficient treatment capacity for those who are sick.

However, as Figure 2 contends these forces have through Covid moved into an asymmetrical orbit with each other. The relationship is asymmetrical because each has a nature and systems conditions where one can easily be understood through the lens of either of the others. It is worthy of note though that, since the outbreak of Covid -19, the public health interest has for the most part been preferred by governments of nation states over the economic interest. This has been done on the basis that the consequences of not preferring this interest will see the virus run unchecked and in the process creating an even larger catastrophe for both economic and public health interests.

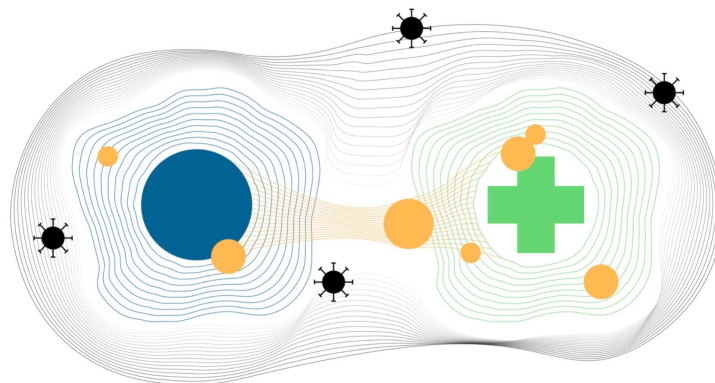


Figure 2. Diagram showing Economy, Public Health and Covid and their asymmetrical effects on Tourism

These hitherto, unquantifiable and asymmetric relationships pose diabolical policy and governance challenges because of the irreconcilability of the competing interests involved and the ‘radical uncertainty’[2] that ongoing asymmetry effects are creating. These are radical because they are creating sets of conditions where models based on probabilistic reasoning cannot anticipate the situations that confront us, thus removing one of the core tools upon which good governance has hitherto been

predicated. Put another way, it creates multiple and often unquantifiable strategic risks that cannot be resolved through modelling. Instead they establish “the biggest risk of all, a problem of governance that derives from definitional ambiguity (that is an effect of asymmetry) and the tendency to resort to obsolete paradigms”[3] as a way to navigate through that asymmetry.

For the majority of us, this experience of asymmetry over the last 18 months has seen the business of tourism and perhaps the concept itself become both extracted and distanced from a mostly neo-classical economic sphere and while for a few ‘business as normal’ may resume for the rest it now sits in an uneasy perhaps unknowable place. This is in a place /space at the confluence of economy, public health and the virus itself. The challenge will be to learn about both how to live in this new space and more importantly how it might compete with other global destinations striving to do the same thing.

It has also upended our sense of time. Until recently, given that economic growth models dominated the sector and the whole idea of the tourist experience has focused attention on the promise of the future (more of, exclusive access to and so forth). This linear view of time or experiences or what we often describe as ‘progress’ causes considerations of the past, if they exist at all, to vanish in the same way a landscape does when a car travels down the road. It also has the effect of inserting into our ‘experienced present’ an unsettling restlessness for the ‘better or good life’ the future promises.

However in times of asymmetry, this linear model of time so integral to modernity is completely destabilised. Now the promise of the future represents itself as a ‘nostalgic normal’ that sometimes vanishes and almost always seems always just out of reach. Instead what we confront are unthinkable asymmetrical impacts and many unknowns. While we would like to ignore these unwanted and mostly unpalatable impacts and instead focus on a return to the normal, these unwelcome visitors have the effect of colliding the future with the now. While there is of course a ‘future future’ it is this ‘now-future’ that demands our attention.

Under these conditions time is rearranged. It is the NOW that matters. What once we saw as the past now becomes our desired future (at least for some) but at the same moment our gaze is fixated on the immediate crisis leaving us little time to contemplate if there might be a better space/place than that we knew so well.

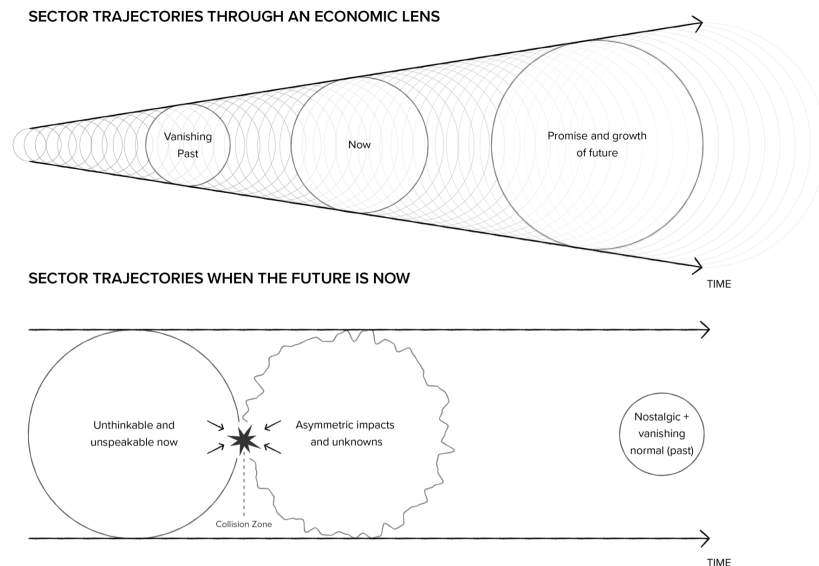


Figure 3.. Diagram showing the dynamics of time and sector trajectories in an asymmetrical world

Divorced from an access to viable and workable models and faced with competing interests and power dynamics, it therefore seems prudent for the sector to learn quickly about living in the ‘no normal.’[4] Several strategies that both accept uncertainty as the given constant seem immediately evident:

1. To embrace the unpalatable reality that uncertainty and volatility is the new norm and that ongoing sustainability and resilience must be based on rapid and constantly changing responses to that volatility (managing confusion and chaos). This requires attention to what is occurring in the relationships between all the forces in play.
2. To create intelligence processes that make visible in near real time the ebbs and flows of activity at both macro and micro scales that make sense. The airline Cathay Pacific for instance learned, during the SARS epidemic, how to do route planning on a day by day basis in an industry where three month+ schedules were the accepted standard.

3. To establish multi-actor governance processes that at a macro level harmonise as far as possible competing interests and responses and that actively seek to remove policy roadblocks. This requires deliberate effort to de-legitimise bureaucratic game planning and the removal of power dynamics that tilt benefit towards the few at the expense of the many (managing complexity).
4. To learn how to recalibrate systems so that their efforts are directed on a constant basis to those who are at the cutting edge of the asymmetry. This requires a shift from a hierarchical top down model of decision making to a bottom up model of decision making.
5. To rapidly leverage and disseminate across the sector practical responses that have embraced this orientation.
6. To invest in capabilities and capacities that facilitate all actors living with this new dynamic.
7. To articulate narratives at a variety of levels that represent this orientation and that facilitate actors being able to organize around those said narratives.

This asymmetrical era we define as the Covid crisis has made visible and perhaps even hyperextended aspects of (in this case) the tourism system; system conditions that in hindsight were already evident. The challenge now is to recognise this new kind of ‘no normal’ reality and begin both the conversation and experiments that will help us learn and understand how to chart a wiser way forward. Some of this will require the most difficult thing of all; learning to let go of and forget what has previously made us successful. This is a journey that is best started sooner rather than later for as many have commented it is but a forerunner to the even greater challenges around climate and life systems that will confront us over the next few decades. We should therefore see this restarting and reimagining of tourism as a time and space of accelerated learning and innovation, one born out of a ‘knowledge humility’ that accepts there are many things that human ingenuity can only accommodate rather than master.

Endnotes

[1] There is considerable difficulty in conceptualising large diffuse systems such as the global economic system or even public health especially in relation to the more amorphous and ever changing presence of the virus itself. Timothy Morton in *Hyperobjects* (2013) argues that all we can ever hope to know about is the localised appearance and effects of any or all of these forces.

[2] Mervyn A. King and J. A. Kay, (2020) *Radical Uncertainty : Decision-Making for an Unknowable Future* (London: Little, Brown Book Group. Loc 2397.

[3] Gatti, L. Chapter 10 p. 175 in T.R. Andersen (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Strategic Risk Management* (Oxon: Routledge, 2016).

[4] There are many who argue that the conditions of a 'no normal' were evident well before the advent of Covid and that all that the virus has done is to make visible and hyper extend their effects. Ziauddin Sardar and John A. Sweeney, (2016) 'The Three Tomorrows of Postnormal Times', *Futures*, 75, 1-13.

Sources:

- Andersen, T.R. (ed.), (2016), *The Routledge Companion to Strategic Risk Management* (Oxon: Routledge).
- King, Mervyn A. and Kay, J. A. (2020), *Radical uncertainty : decision-making for an unknowable future* (London: Little, Brown Book Group).
- Morton, T. (2013) *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. (Univ. of Minnesota Press. London).
- Sardar, Ziauddin and Sweeney, John A. (2016), 'The Three Tomorrows of Postnormal Times', *Futures*, 75, 1-13.