Citizen Scientist 2020

Reading a favorite satirist and punster sometimes brings chuckles, often groans but a recent column near the end of March was nothing short of profoundly inspiring. She told a story of how Newton, fleeing to the countryside during a plague, decided to use the time to work out the math leading to gravitational mechanics. She encouraged us to do something different during this time, something equivalent to Newton's effort. Then, of course, she veered off the path and into the weeds with groan-worthy puns, similes and analogies .

However, I had just such a thought in early February as our plague picked up steam. So above the list items such as "paint bathroom ceiling" or "fix leaky faucet", I placed "discover anti-gravity". It turns out that anti-gravity is a REALLY HARD PROBLEM. So as an alternative, perhaps slightly more achievable goal, I decided to try to become a Citizen Scientist. Here's the story so far.

The plague news is disturbingly short on science. The pronouncements, updates and prognostications are understandably filled with emotionally charged reporting. Stories about people facing fear, heartbreak, loneliness, destitution of the "there, but for the grace of God, go I…". Many experts offered dramatically differing opinions ("it's a hoax! it's the apocalypse!, it's the flu, it's a death sentence..."). So I adopted a maxim from the old arms control negotiations - "Trust but verify".

Happily, data capturing various aspects of the plague are maintained and updated daily by the CDC, Kaggle.com, Johns Hopkins, other orgs. I first decided looking at data from all the United States would likely "wash out" emerging trends and particularly regions of interest. For example, confirmed cases in the US are ~500,000 while data from Seattle and New York with thousands of cases would mask trends in different regions of interest such as my area with a "mere" 1000 cases. An initial task then was to extract the data for various areas of interest:

* Kansas City, KS
* Montgomery County, MD
* King County, WA
* Sno

Acknowledgements:

Alexandra Petri Twitter: @petridishes

CDC

Kaggle.com

Johns Hopkins CSSE