

Opinion  
Power

# Unexpected Item in Bagging Area: What the panic buying frenzy during the Coronavirus crisis really reveals about us

*Rebecca Greenwood*

## Who said seven packets of pasta and thirty-two toilet rolls was an irrational response to a global pandemic?

Wed 25 Mar 2020  
10.00 GMT

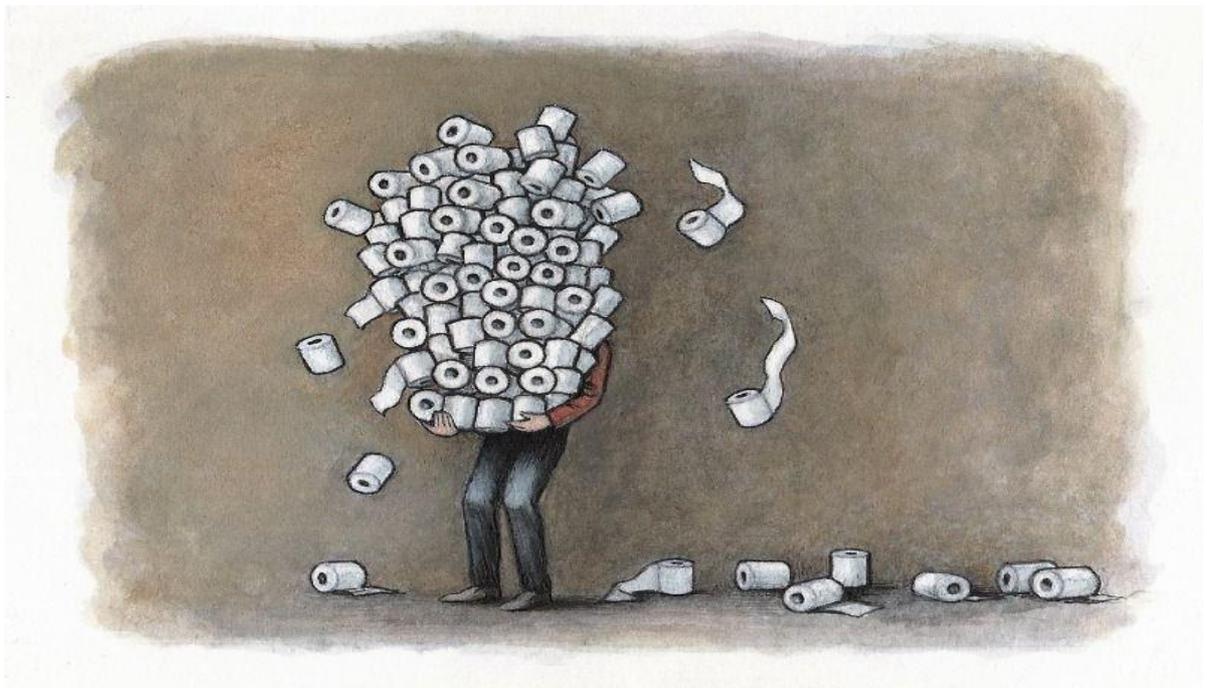


Illustration by John Sadler.

The term ‘panic buying’ - a human response in times of crisis - is not caused by food shortages per se, but by the dreadful F word. Fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of losing control. Fear of not having enough Jammy Dodgers for the naughty cupboard. Which, by the way, would not be a fear at all, if we all shared food like the rational human beings we are, instead of flocking like sheep every time we see a Facebook post telling us, “We’re all going to starve to death!”

Many of us would have watched the catastrophe over the past month. Walking into a sort of dystopian, post-apocalyptic scene from a zombie film. One minute, the shelves are stacked high with every variation of milk you could ever imagine (that’s a story for another day) and then the next, there’s just a few sad digestive biscuits and lonely packs of flour on the top shelf. Why may this be, you ask?

Panic. Panic is contagious. It's a virus we've all caught from the posts and papers. They take the 'common' out of 'sense'.

Now, I know panic is the very last thing any of us want right now. But every time we flick on our phones or tablets or televisions and are welcomed with the occasional headline, telling us not to ransack the supermarket shelves, a little light bulb flickers at the back of our head, which signals: you *must* ransack the supermarket shelves. I'll give you an example.

Two weeks ago, pre-lockdown, I popped into Sainsbury's, as one does, to buy some milk, tissues, mixed-veg and two cans of baked beans. A perfectly normal, human task if you ask me. It shouldn't be too difficult? If I'm honest though, I did prepare myself for a search of finding the milk, but was completely unaware that all the other items were disappearing too. The mite pests have been... I accidentally said out loud, whilst receiving a few eye-brow raises and strange looks from fellow shoppers, also desperate for the Heinz Beanz. Seconds after, I was taken out by a herd of animals rattling their trolleys whilst sprinting down aisle nine for, what seemed to be, the cheese. It was like the final one hundred metres at the Olympics. "We're all going to starve to death!" One individual shouted, whilst stockpiling the entire shelf into her trolley. She'd obviously seen the Facebook post.

As witnessed here, social media coverage clearly sets the agenda for public response. Although the media doesn't tell us what to think necessarily, it definitely tells us what to think about. Numerous individuals have enjoyed posting and tweeting the viral "[#toilet-paper-gate](#)" and "[#toilet-paper-crisis](#)," tags whilst proudly uploading a pic of their thirty-two rolls of 'Supreme Quilted Andrex'. Has the world gone mad? I definitely would've opted for 'Classic Clean' myself. Seriously though, this social media phenomenon has sent people into a state of frenzy as if their lives depend on it.

I do understand that preparing for a period of isolation is also caused by our ingrained survival mechanisms and not necessarily by irrational fear. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt there. However, it does not take away from the fact that every time I open Twitter, I should not be greeted with "Quick! Get those eggs in your basket!" To which I respond with "Sorry, that's not really my cup of tea." Clearly, our survival mechanisms are constantly being fed false news from those pesky platforms; which I think we can all agree, we'd rather live without. It's fair to say, the Coronavirus crisis really has revealed a lot about us.

To elaborate on the matter, [Davide Savage](#), an Associate Professor of Behavioural and Microeconomics, who has written about the rationality behind stocking up in a crisis says, "It is rational to prepare for something bad that looks like it is likely to occur." However, "It is not rational to buy 500 cans of baked beans for what would likely to be a two-week isolation period." Well, this explains why I couldn't find the Heinz. The American food writer, [Helen Rosner](#), also noted an element of "fantasy" to the shoppers who fill entire trolleys full with cases of water, given that "staying at home for a few weeks isn't quite nuclear holocaust." Of course, there is enough food to go around, it's just in times of crisis (by crisis I mean of social media too) people forget there are others living in the world as well. Shock, I know.

Major newspapers have published up to 10,000 stories about the outbreak. Of these, 1,000 articles mentioned the words "fear" or "afraid". The Sun and The Daily Mail are particularly guilty of using these scare mongering tactics, routinely referring to the virus as a "deadly disease", which instantly sent people fleeing to the shops, believing that the end was near. It really irritates me you know.

Who said seven packets of pasta and thirty-two toilet rolls was an irrational response to a global pandemic? I mean, who said our relationship with food was rational anyway? In all seriousness though, many of these reports clearly present themselves as a catalyst for public fear, instead of providing people with useful information about the spread of the virus.

As former US president [Franklin D Roosevelt](#) once famously stated, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Yet in a time bursting with fake news, conspiracy theories and hundreds of Andrex toilet paper selfies, it’s important to remain alert of your surroundings and realise that the real damage is not necessarily the empty shelves, but the media platforms who have the power to control an entire world population.

(988 words)