The superbug scare should spur Asia to get ready to deal with the next disease outbreak, writes **Alex Zhang**

Prepared for pandemics

Pity the World Health Organisation. Only a few days after it announced that the H1N1 swine flu had "largely run its course" worldwide, reports of a superbug gene – NDM-1 – prompted a new outbreak of fear. Cases were reported in Hong Kong and Asian nations including India and Pakistan, while the superbug is becoming a global health threat to North America, Australia and Europe.

NDM-1's resistance to antibiotics gives it the potential to be a serious worldwide public health problem. As always, Asia is at risk due to its high population density, increasing migration and regional travel, and underdeveloped health care systems.

Haven't we heard all this before? The WHO overreacted in the case of swine flu, avian flu and a variety of other diseases. The past two decades have seen more than 30 outbreaks of new pandemic diseases, and about one-third of those started in Asia. With the media repeatedly warning that every new disease could be a massive global killer, it's easy to dismiss the latest outbreak, whether it's swine flu or a superbug.

That would be a mistake. Recent estimates agree that a pandemic or epidemic event over a year could reduce global gross domestic product by more than 2.5 per cent (US$3 trillion approximately). Without tough action, it's a question of when, not if, a pandemic causes death on a scale that makes severe acute respiratory syndrome look mild.

A stronger government role and better business involvement should be the key for pandemic preparedness in Asia. While some people are complaining that the danger of many viruses was always exaggerated by the WHO, pandemics, especially flu viruses such as swine flu and avian flu, are notoriously unpredictable and constantly changing. Asia must develop a comprehensive surveillance system and sufficient health care infrastructure.

Asia can improve in these three areas: First, due to the high cost of treatment for many pandemic diseases (drugs and vaccines) and growing populations, Asia is challenged by inadequate health care financing and resources. It needs more in the long term. The United States devoted 19.3 per cent of government resources to health care in 2006, considerably more than China, India and Indonesia did – at 9.9 per cent, 3.4 per cent and 6.2 per cent respectively. Per capita, the three Asian

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countries have fewer than one-fifth of the physicians, nurses and hospital beds that the US has. Because of a shortage of nurses, health care equipment and hospital beds, Hong Kong and mainland China were ill-prepared for the outbreak of Sars in 2003, which led to a failure to even protect nurses and paramedics.

Second, research shows that Asian countries are largely ineffective in crafting pandemic and epidemic management plans that go beyond basic WHO recommendations. National vaccination strategies and continuity plans for public services are essential when pandemics strike. Last year, mainland China's attempt to introduce a swine flu vaccine ran into delays because it failed to allay public concerns over the vaccine's safety and effectiveness.

In addition, a lack of transparency about pandemic diseases in Asian countries could hamper control efforts. For example, critics said the attempts by the Chinese, Thai and Indonesian governments to hide the Sars and H5N1 outbreaks led to delays in the global surveillance of the viruses.

By contrast, the Japanese government provides detailed steps for key stakeholders to take during a pandemic, and guidelines for capacity development over the years. Partly because of those effective measures, Japan had no confirmed cases of Sars, and was unaffected by the avian flu until the end of last year. It also has an adult HIV/Aids prevalence rate of less than 0.1 per cent.

Vietnam, too, did well to cope with the Sars outbreak in 2003, even though it lacked resources. It isolated patients and implemented effective infection-control measures early on. As a result, it was the first to be removed from the list of countries with local transmission of Sars.

Finally, businesses should co-operate with the government more closely on preparedness. Key industries such as tourism, transport and retail, which are most likely to be affected by pandemic outbreaks, should co-ordinate with governments to identify specific practices to help improve pandemic preparedness.

In addition, expanded public–private partnerships with pharmaceutical companies will probably help improve the availability of drugs and vaccines during pandemics. Last year, the Chinese government allocated nearly US$725 million for H1N1 research and vaccine production, which involved 11 Chinese pharmaceutical companies. Production began in June that year and was expected to have a manufacturing capacity of 360 million doses per year, making the Chinese vaccine production one of the biggest and fastest in the world.

In short, pandemic diseases affect economic activity in the region and threaten the health and lives of people. Future preparedness is the key. Governments and businesses in the region should collaborate to build effective safeguards against pandemics to ensure rapid action to combat them.

Pandemics will continue to kill. The media will continue to be alarmist about the next new bug. But intelligent policies can minimise the inevitable death toll.

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Tsang's next post

Much media attention has been focused on the announcement by the chief executive's office that it will launch a Facebook page – and the subsequent advert for staff to operate it. As governments around the world tap into the power of the internet to get their message across, it is only natural that Hong Kong should take a stab at Government 2.0. Donald Tsang Yam-kuen himself was seen with an iPad at his last question and answer session in the legislature. It will undoubtedly keep him in touch with the latest on the site, but whether it will help him gauge public sentiment, we will have to wait and see.

Governments through the ages have tried all sorts of ways to engage their constituents. Each technological breakthrough – radio, television and the internet – opened new platforms and added tools and rules for interaction. And with that, citizens – who are now also "netizens" – have come to expect more transparency, more effort in encouraging public participation, and more genuine and instantaneous forms of engagement with their governments.

New tools alone will not ensure the government communicates better with the people. It all boils down to the basics. While no one would reasonably expect the chief executive to answer every thread, comment and debate posted on the page, a more demanding public will expect much more than a Facebook version of the Government Information Service website.

By Facebook-ing his office, the chief executive is setting a precedent for his successors, and there's no turning back. As it is supposed to be an official page, it should have a permanence that one would not expect from a personal page. This means that, unless Facebook folds or until an *über*Facebook comes along, this will be part of the office of future chief executives. No one with an iota of political sense would shut it down. After all, what kind of message would that send?

And, therefore, it must serve as much more than a political gimmick or an excuse to add staff. The page must reflect the government's willingness to be more open and responsive to public participation. Its content and the way feedback is handled will be a measure of that. Do it right and it may help funnel and facilitate quality public debate over issues and policies. Poorly handled, it will guarantee a feast for cyber-pranksters and attract the occasional attention-seeking nut. But if the page can provide people an additional – and dare we say, better – access point to understand policies and issues, and have their say on them, then it will serve a real purpose.

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Keeping the public engaged will not be easy. The government should look to the experiences of its undersecretaries and political assistants who have been running their Facebook accounts for some time now. Taking the time to respond and to engage thoughtfully isn't rocket science but it takes sincerity and genuine effort. Adding that personal touch – and not merely propagating the "line to take" – is essential. Of course, being open makes it easier to attract bad press – it comes with the territory.

Or perhaps the chief executive's office should take a leaf out of lawmaker Regina Ip Lau Suk-yee's Facebook page. The time, care and attention she attaches to managing her account is obvious. Not everyone is a fan, of course, but she still leads her peers in her ability to use the page to disseminate information, converse with her constituents, and even organise events.

With Facebook having recently passed its 500-million-user mark (if Facebook were a country, it would be the world's third largest), it is unlikely to be a fad. The White House's official Facebook page boasts a following of over 700,000. We won't all "like" the chief executive's office's page, nor agree with every one of its policies or decisions, but we should encourage its efforts to be more open and direct with the public.

Just remember not to click on the "dislike" button: it could be a virus aimed at stealing your personal information to be sold to other companies.

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Voices: Hong Kong

The gap between 'two systems' grows narrower

Frank Ching

A little over a year ago, many people were up in arms about a report that the Hong Kong administration and the central government's liaison office here had reached an agreement to give local members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference a greater role in Hong Kong. *Wen Wei Po*, a local communist newspaper, reported that there was a 10-point agreement on the functions and role of Hong Kong members of the CPPCC, China's top advisory body. This report was vigorously denied by both the Hong Kong government and the liaison office.

However, lo and behold, when Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen began his consultations this month on what to say in his next policy address, whom did he consult first? Why, Hong Kong members of the CPPCC and Hong Kong deputies of the National People's Congress, of course.

The CPPCC members are appointed by the central government, ostensibly to advise it on the running of state affairs. NPC deputies are elected, in a fashion, but their job, too, is to help run China and not Hong Kong. In March 1998, during the first post-handover meetings of the NPC and CPPCC, then president Jiang Zemin (江澤民) said: "Local deputies would only represent Hong Kong compatriots to participate in the running of state affairs on the mainland."

Well, times have changed. It seems clear that the Hong Kong administration has agreed to give members of the CPPCC and NPC deputies a status they did not previously enjoy.

It appears Beijing initially believed "one country, two systems" meant it should give Hong Kong the highest degree of autonomy possible. Hong Kong did not have to consult China's advisers on the policy address. In fact, the liaison office was only given a copy of the speech as a courtesy after it was already printed.

Of course, CPPCC and NPC delegates do have good, useful ideas. And if they were elected in Hong Kong to represent the people here in the NPC and CPPCC, they would certainly have a legitimate role within Hong Kong, as well.

> It seems odd that ... Beijing's advisers should automatically become Hong Kong's advisers as well

But, currently, they are appointed by Beijing to help govern the mainland, not to help run Hong Kong. Actually, even under the current system, there is a lot these members can do. For one thing, they can help their constituents, such as Hong Kong businesspeople and tourists who get into trouble on the mainland. That alone should keep them busy.

In view of the "one country, two systems" policy, it seems odd that Beijing should want Hong Kong to agree that whomever it appoints as its advisers should automatically become advisers to the Hong Kong administration as well.

Consultation of Beijing appointees is a relatively recent development. NPC deputies were not consulted on the drafting of a policy address until 2005, after Tsang became chief executive. This has become a practice every year since.

Now, it appears, CPPCC members are also to be formally consulted every year on the policy address, and probably on other issues as well.

According to last year's *Wen Wei Po* report, the Hong Kong administration would also appoint Beijing's appointees to public office and confer on them public honours.

We have now seen the first part of this agreement being carried out. No doubt, other parts are yet to follow. Of course, we can't say that "one country, two systems" has been junked. Hong Kong is still very different from other Chinese cities. But it does appear that Beijing has changed its thinking over the years on how this policy is supposed to work. The central government now has Hong Kong on a shorter and shorter leash.

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Voices: Economy

China's amazing run must come to an end

Gwynne Dyer

Will the 21st century belong to China? For a while, perhaps – but only in the sense that it was said to belong to Japan in the 1980s. Looking back now that seems ridiculous but, at the time, best-selling books were predicting that the rest of the planet would be reduced to virtual serfdom by the relentless high-speed growth of the Japanese economy. Then it stopped growing.

Official data reveal that China's economy has overtaken Japan's this year, making it the second-biggest economy in the world. This followed last month's announcement by the International Energy Agency that China is now the world's biggest consumer of energy. If the average growth rates of the US and Chinese economies over the past quarter of a century continue for another 10 years (around 10 per cent for China, and 3 per cent for the US), then China's economy will be bigger than that of the US.

But hang on. China is already the world's second-biggest importer of energy (mostly oil and coal), and its biggest importer of minerals and other industrial raw materials. None of those resources is growing at 10 per cent a year. If China's imports of those goods grow at 10 per cent a year, then the share of other countries must shrink.

China still has an export-led economy, and these other countries are its customers. If commodity prices soar, because of Chinese demand, then how will those other countries earn the money to pay for Chinese goods? So Chinese growth must eventually slow – but when?

The straight-line projection of current trends would make the Chinese economy bigger than that of the US by 2020. But most economic consultancies now suggest China will not overtake the US until some time between 2027 and 2030.

That implicitly assumes that China will shift to a much lower annual rate of growth in the near future: to only 5 or 6 per cent. However, no organisation that is making money from the current orgy wants to spoil the party by spelling out what might cause that decline – so let us do it here.

Back in 1988, the last year of Japan's 30-year boom, the land in the garden of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo was allegedly worth more than the state of California, but that was just another way of saying "unsustainable property bubble". The bubble duly burst, bringing down the entire Japanese economy with it – and it has stayed down for the past 22 years.

The property bubble in China is reaching similar dimensions. There is huge overinvestment in China. The population is ageing almost as fast as Japan's. If the same inputs tend to produce the same outputs, then the Chinese economy is in big trouble.

That doesn't necessarily mean China also faces two decades of less than 2 per cent growth. It does probably mean it faces a very nasty slump, followed by the transition to a permanently lower rate of growth. Not so terrible, really. But it may threaten the regime's survival, since its popularity depends almost entirely on its record in delivering the economic goods.

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Voices: Technology

Verbs – the future of internet searches

Esther Dyson

Imagine that Googling an address gave you a list of the closest buildings, ranked by distance. Not exactly what you were looking for, most likely. But that is pretty close to what we still accept for most internet searches. You don't get what you actually want to finish your task; you get a list of pages that might lead you to it.

That is beginning to change. Even as the online world has turned its attention from searching to social networking, search is getting interesting again.

Consider the development of online search in the broadest terms. First came Yahoo, with its carefully cultivated (by human editors) catalogue of interesting Web pages. Then along came Google, with its innovative ranking of Web pages not just by their content, but also by the quantity and quality of other pages that link to them.

Social networking brings a new insight. People are likely to buy what their friends recommend, which is why marketers should spend time on social networks and join the conversation, rather than interrupt it with traditional advertising.

But what happens when, influenced by their friends, people actually go to buy something or take some action? That long list of links to pages that may or may not contain what they want looks pretty old.

Now, however, something is happening to fix this. It has structure – the same sort of context the old Yahoo catalogue supplied. But this time it is automatically generated and deeper – and across more than just a few categories such as sports and travel.

For example, what people want (and are now getting) in product search is not a list of pages, but a set of products displayed in some meaningful fashion. They want a map of the product space, not a list. The challenge of course, is that each kind of product has a different structure and a different set of attributes.

Consider wines: you can sort them by price, year or region of origin, by red, white or rosé, or by sparkling or still. For clothes, you want sizes and colours – and perhaps some filters depending on your personal characteristics – and of course a "buy now" button.

A couple of years ago, Bill Gates uttered one of the smartest things he has ever said: "The future of search is verbs." But he said it at a private dinner and it never spread.

To me, the meaning was clear: when people search, they aren't just looking for nouns or information; they are looking for action. They want to book a flight, reserve a table, buy a product, cure a hangover, take a class, fix a leak, resolve an argument, or occasionally find a person, for which Facebook is very handy. They mostly want to find something in order to do something.

Most things don't exist in isolation. They have complex relationships to other things, and by representing that information using verbs – for example, "the company that Google acquired" versus "the company that Google competes with" – we can represent the world more accurately. And that means better, more meaningful responses when we search.

Esther Dyson, chairman of EDventure Holdings, is an active investor in a variety of start-ups around the world. Copyright: Project Syndicate