



## Exploring the virus metaphor in corruption theory: Corruption as a virus?

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### Introduction

Corruption within organisations is frequently referred to as a type of virus, a concept that is undoubtedly used to shine light on its perceived destructive nature. When most of us think of viruses it is hard not to make associations with epidemics such as the SARS-virus that spread from Asia and threatened to become a pandemic in the early 2000s or maybe the more recent Swine Flu that hit the western countries with a swift blow killing hundreds of people. Within popular media many books and movies portray stories of how a new deadly virus spreads at such a rapid pace that it threatens to annihilate the human race from the face of the earth, or indeed even turn people into flesh eating zombies. It is obvious that when corruption and virus are mentioned in connection with one another it is almost exclusively with a nod towards our underlying fear of *the deadly virus*. Or, put differently, linking the virus with corruption is a powerful tool used by scholars to highlight both the vicious power of corruption as well as its contagious nature. When writing this note we have been inspired by Røvik (2011) as well as Morgan's classic and influential book *Images of organisation* (1986). Both scholars concern themselves with the complexity of the metaphor within organisations and Røvik, just as we do, uses the concept of virology to make his case. We have a rare advantage when dealing with the virus metaphor in being trained micro- and molecular infection biologists and thus we believe that we are well suited to tackle the metaphor of the virus in corruption theory. In our attempts to demonstrate how the virus metaphor shapes our understanding of corruption we focused on more recent advances in corruption theories that describe a dynamic processual spread and escalation of corruption, as we believe

that these correlate well with the nature of virology. When reviewing features of virology we utilized literature that we have come across in our own undergraduate studies as biologists. Scientific articles within natural sciences tend, naturally, to have a highly specific focus in their attempts to describe the world of viruses and are more engaged in claiming new findings on specific molecule binding sites rather than, on a more general level, describing virology. An introductory but still detailed text book on the other hand, is most of the time considerably more straightforward and puts concepts and theories into a larger context that aims to build a basic understanding towards the subject at hand.

### *Aim (and structure)*

As briefly described above, scholars within corruption theory commonly use virus as a metaphor to portray corruption as an evil, spreading and escalating phenomenon. By 1) clarifying what the metaphor of the virus brings to corruption and 2) juxtaposing this with more recent corruption theory our note aims to 3) unfold interesting aspects we believe have not yet been emphasised enough within corruption theories.

## **Metaphors**

According to Morgan (1986) metaphors are paradoxical in that they create insight, which at the same time become misrepresentations of the very thing one seeks to explain. Some things will inherently be left out, seeing through metaphors is also a way of not seeing. In his own words; 'the interesting aspect of metaphor is that it always produces [...] one-sided insight, [by] highlighting certain interpretations it tends to force others into a background role' (*ibid.*: 4). This would imply that metaphors frame our understanding in a distinctive yet partial way. Metaphors are also, in essence, the process of moving a concept from a source domain towards a target domain, which hopefully leads to the creation of novel insights and inferences about the target domain (Røvik, 2011). That is to say that the sentence 'The man is a lion' would imply that the 'man' is brave, strong and ferocious because those are characteristics we associate with a lion (Morgan, 1986). Organisational theorists who are looking to use metaphors in illuminating a concept are however often 'playing on foreign ground' when encountering source domains outside of their own field, they might only possess a superficial knowledge of the chosen metaphors and their respective domains (e.g. the machine, the brain, the organism or in the case of many corruption theorists, the *virus*). Thus, most of the metaphors imported from a source domain to a target domain suffer from a chronic knowledge imbalance (*ibid.*).

This imbalance is of course only to be expected; in fact, one could say that it wouldn't be a metaphor without it.

Metaphors can also carry an intrinsic reverberative power (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), they have the ability to sometimes emphasize or even change our understanding of a word or concept. A good example is 'Love is madness' in which the metaphor can provide a new meaning to love. If those things entailed by the metaphor are for us the most important qualities of our love experiences, then the metaphor can obtain the status of truth; love is truly madness for some people. Because of this the metaphor provides a feedback effect, guiding our actions in accordance with it. We expect to, and thus become, 'mad' when in love (*ibid.*).

The idea that metaphors are just a matter of language and can at best only describe reality stems from the view that what is real is exclusively external to, and autonomous of, how humans conceptualize the world – as if the study of reality was only the study of the physical world. The idea of an 'objective reality' unaffected by human culture leaves out all the subjective agency of how humans perceive the world, motivate their actions and act accordingly. No, the idea of reality – objective reality that is – is surely not how the world works. Metaphors are a large part of our everyday life, not just in our language but also in thought and action. The way we think is fundamentally metaphorical (*ibid.*).

### **Virus in corruption theory**

Both in layman's terms and scientific discourse the metaphor of the virus seems to be widespread when referring to corruption. As our aim was to explore how the virus metaphor is used within the field of corruption theory we performed a literature review, displayed in table 1. Important to note is that we did not select articles based on the different use of *the virus*, we only took the first relevant hits on Google Scholar. Looking towards the table it is striking, and somewhat surprising, how varied the use of *the virus* seems to be among our fellow scholars: Corruption can proliferate within an organisation as a virus and needs to be remedied, corruption is a kind of social virus, corruption is a dangerous virus infection of a group, organisation, or industry, the spread of the corruption-virus is capable of crippling all of a country's institutions, there is anxiety about the strength of the virus of corruption. These examples highlight some of the very different meanings given to the concept. However, there appear to be two somewhat common ways to apply the concept of the virus: 1) as a connection between our innate fear of the destructive, dangerous virus and corruption, undoubtedly a way to make an argument or a description of a corruption

phenomenon more colourful and vibrant; 2) There is also a clear connection between a virus' epidemiological pattern (i.e. it spreads) and corruption. But it does not only spread, apparently it also seems to escalate, to become more harmful the longer it has time to propagate, to infect, to do harm. Put these alleged functions of a virus together and we have briefly summarized the extent of how corruption theorists appear to use the metaphor.

Author(s)	Quotes from articles	The virus metaphor implies that...
Huberts, 1995: 7-18	'Italian politics appeared to be penetrated by structural corruption and in a short period of time the traditional party political system was destroyed by the corruption-virus'; 'The awareness of the presence of the corruption-virus is growing, and in public and expert opinion there is some anxiety about the strength of the virus'; 'Political parties in a lot of Western European countries might argue that their negligence is justified by the absence of the corruption-virus in their societies'; 'Nations will have to develop methods to combat the corruption-virus and to prevent its spreading'.	Corruption spreads within organisations as well as having the power to infect a whole bureaucratic system. Corruption can also spread from infected to uninfected societies, and nations need to develop defence systems for protection.
Luo, 2008: 191-192	'The cell of virus exists when guanxi and corruption are highly intertwined but the level of power abuse is relatively low'; 'It seems hard to find a panacea to remove virus in this cell since it requires maturations of both formal structures and social norms'.	Corruption is a local phenomenon e.g. within an organisation.
Okogbule, 2006: 92	'It suggests the strengthening of these mechanisms and a re-orientation of social values as the best strategy for dealing with the corruption-virus in the country'.	Corruption can infect a whole nation.
Ma, 1989: 49	'While these practices were disclosed at the beginning, the sequence of events shows how rapidly the virus of corruption can breed in the wake of reform'.	Corruption rapidly breeds when systems are changing (almost strategically).
Nieuwenboer and	'...assists managers in gaining a better understanding of the causes of	Corruption spreads just like a virus.

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Kaptein, 2008: 142	corruption and the reasons why it spreads like a virus’.	
Sarre <i>et al.</i> , 2005: 201	‘When corruption becomes widespread in society like a virus, the traces it leaves behind become permanent’.	Corruption has the ability to spread throughout an entire society.
Bhargava and Bolongait a, 2004: 1	‘We are all deeply concerned about the spread of corruption, which is a virus capable of crippling government, discrediting public institutions and private corporations and having a devastating impact on the human rights of populations, and thus undermining society and its development, affecting in particular the poor’.	Corruption can spread between, infect and cripple all institutions of a nation, which will ultimately have devastating effects on the nation’s whole population.
Osobaa, 1996: 372	‘Corruption in Nigeria is a kind of social virus which is a hybrid of traits of fraudulent anti-social behaviour derived from British colonial rule’.	Corruption has established itself in the social and cultural systems of a society.
Aliyu and Bayero, 2008: 1	‘Corruption has also been described as a deadly virus that attacks the vital structures that makes for a society’s progressive functioning’.	Corruption has a consciousness of its own and strategically infects specific vital structures of societies.
Ashforth <i>et al.</i> , 2008: 671	‘The concept of corruption reflects not just the corrupt behaviour of any single individual – defined as the illicit use of one’s position or power for perceived personal or collective gain – but also the dangerous virus like infection’.	Corruption has the ability to infect individuals, groups of individuals, organisations and even institutions.

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*Table 1: Quotations from articles exemplifying how the concept of virus is commonly used*

### *The dynamic and escalating corruption*

We have argued that the metaphor of the virus is commonly used to describe how corruption spreads and escalates in proportion and magnitude. If we once again turn our attention to table 1 we can observe not only *that* the virus metaphor is used but also *how* it is used (see examples above). A virus is organic, it is a biological entity, thus one could say that it not only tells the story of the ‘destructive and spreading corruption virus’ but it also suggests that corruption is a dynamic, changeable and almost living phenomenon with its own inherent force. It is then of particular interest that recent advances within the field of corruption are putting forth similar ideas describing corruption as a dynamic and escalating phenomenon (see e.g. Fleming and Zyglidopoulos, 2008;

Nieuwenboer and Kaptein, 2008; Zyglidopoulos et al., 2009). Formulating theories involves deep intellectual work, conceptual as well as abstract thinking, and as such it involves metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). These scholars are formulating attractive theories on how we can understand corruption in a better way, but in doing so we believe that they also provide corruption with its own intrinsic force, a force that fits with how a virus behaves. With words like 'spread', 'escalate' and 'dynamic' it is easy to connect many corruption theorists with their previous use of the virus as a metaphor for corruption. If corruption theorists denote that corruption is like a virus then that would imply that some of the features of viruses would be transferred to corruption, following the reasoning of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Morgan (1986). So what is the virus metaphor bringing to the understanding of corruption? In the following sections we seek to juxtapose corruption and some of its processual theories with some of the features of a virus.

### *Infection of an organisation*

To establish some demarcations for the elaboration and expansion of the virus metaphor we need to state how we have chosen to represent different levels of virology within corruption. Following the infectious routes (see below) of the corruption virus we denote that the individual actor is to be seen as the cell of a host's body, individuals forming groups/sub-units are to be seen as a body's differentiated organs and an organisation as being made up of a multitude of organs forming a body. With that said, we can turn our attention to how a corruption virus spreads, or more correctly put, how a corruption infection escalates in proportion and severity within organisations. We have chosen to focus on two distinct routes that the infection of a body (organisation) with a corruption virus could take. The two routes described are in reality not as differentiated as the text might show, as they are often working simultaneously and overlap. Nevertheless the course of the infection process creates a clearer framework of separate directions that an infection from a corruption virus might take.

#### *Route 1: Infection*

A virus infects a body, evades the immune system response, is able to replicate and by doing so interferes with normal cellular protein synthesis and functions, leading to damage and ultimately death of the infected cell. Death of a cell means that a massive number of viruses will be released into the extracellular space or in the case of corruption: in between individuals. The virus is then able to spread further by infecting more cells/individuals. Over time important functions of the

body/organisation will deteriorate and subsequently wither and die if this process is not halted.

The first step of a virus infection is always the same, a few virus particles are able to adhere to a cell and move in to it and begin to proliferate. Corruption thus infects a single individual, or a few individuals (the bad apples) and if that or those individuals are unable to repel the initial infection, corruption spreads to an increasing number of people. More so, although highly unlikely, the internal spread of corruption in an organisation could then take massive proportions and over time move from an internal spread to a spread between different organisations on an epidemic (regional) and even an pandemic (global) scale. Important to note is that we are not claiming that an individual would actually die by being corrupt. It could however indicate that an individual needs to become increasingly corrupt before performing a corrupt act and infecting a substantially increased number of individuals.

Some virus strains do not always cause this explosion-like release of a massive amount of virus at once. Some viruses exit their host cell via a mechanism called budding; meaning the release of one virus particle at the time and without destruction of the initial cell. An interesting question is which mechanism could be the most effective when it comes to the spread and severity of corruption within an organisation? If corruption spreads in similar ways, it would probably depend on its ability to evade the organisation's defence mechanisms.

#### *Route 2: Immune response*

A virus infects a body, but the immune system is able to mount an effective response either before the virus can grab hold of a cell or after an initial infection has started. If the body is able to clear the virus it also gains immunity towards that specific strain of virus.

On most occasions when a virus infects a host the immune system is able to mount an effective response and clear the virus, often without the host ever exhibiting any symptoms. As the escalation of deception (Fleming and Zyglidopoulos, 2008) can be perceived as 'spiralling down' the working of a corruption virus can be understood in a similar manner; the more individuals that are infected the more severe the symptoms will be. In Fleming and Zyglidopoulos (2008) article 'The Escalation of deception in organizations' they describe a number of different halting moderators that can stop corruption before it escalates and spreads throughout the organisation. Then if the corruption virus is detected by the immune system because it raises enough attention, halting mechanisms will be mounted and the process of escalation will

immediately come to a stop. They also suggest that a reinforced and applied ethical code of conduct could help in halting an escalation process. Depending on how well the ethical code is implemented and reinforced there will be a defence mechanism present which could be said to be a type of artificial immunity i.e. the organisation is in some way vaccinated against a specific type of corruption and thus make it impossible for corruption to infect the organisation.

One important characteristic of defence against infections is the body's/organisation's ability to build natural immunity as this exponentially increases the immune system's ability to clear an infection. This can only be achieved if the body or organisation has been previously stricken with the same disease and successfully managed to eradicate it. This also means that the organisation cannot be infected (i.e. sick) with the same corruption virus again as the immune response will eradicate the virus with ease.

In a body the escalation process of a virus particles depends on how effectively the immune defence mechanisms can mount a response. When it comes to corruption, its spread and escalation is most likely also dependent on organisational defence systems, and as in the case of the HIV-virus which infects and destroys cells of the immune system, it is inevitable that if nothing is done about the corruption virus the whole organisation will become infected and perhaps perish over time.

Key to the detection and successful elimination of corruption within an organisation is how much attention the virus attracts; there will not be a sufficient immune response to clear the virus if the corrupt deeds go unnoticed. This means that the corruption virus can exist, spread and go undetected within an organisation as long as it does not attract too much attention.

## Concluding remarks

The aim of this note has been to unfold the use of virus as an explanatory concept or metaphor for the spread and escalation of corruption. For one thing, we believe that it has demonstrated a number of novel insights into how one might connect virology to corruption as well as what that merger might show. However, our attempt at this point is not to be taken as trying to create a new theory on how corruption works. With our literature review it would not be difficult to jump into a harsh critique on the problems of using *the virus* in the 'wrong' way, but that would in no way be productive, it is used as a metaphor and we should therefore treat it as such. However, we do find this inconsistent manner somewhat troubling but it has nothing to do with right or wrong, it is



more of a reflection on what such use of the virus metaphor brings with it. As stated above, metaphors have a profound way of influencing the way we think and reflect upon the world around us, corruption theorists and the way we formulate our theories are obviously no exception to this. As such this could be viewed in two ways, as something to be aware of (since virus as a biological entity and corruption have very little in common) and something to build on.

Perhaps there is more to the notion of the virus within corruption than the mere clarification of a metaphor. With the above outlined discussion it is feasible to speculate that the virus metaphor has implications for the understanding of how corruption functions within an organisation. As we have pointed out, moving the notion of a concept from its source domain to assign features to a target domain (in our case, corruption) is a powerful tool that gives rise to a number of properties for the target domain. Some of the features perhaps highlight aspects of corruption while others will indisputably move into the shadows, as that is the nature of a metaphor. Thus, if a concept becomes intertwined with a theory, it is also reasonable that the concept will have an impact on how we understand the phenomenon, not least as it could be said that the virus seems to 'fit' with the idea of how corruption spreads and is perceived, just as a virus, as something inherently evil. Corruption can also be said to be many things; what is viewed as something corrupt in one culture might not be in another one. There can also be different types of corrupt acts e.g. bribing someone is different from embezzling money but both are generally still viewed as something corrupt. Proclaiming that corruption is like a virus moves those connotations into the shadows, i.e. the metaphor blinds us from understanding corruption as a pluralistic and varied phenomenon.

In contrast to what some corruption theories are saying about corruption; Viruses are everywhere, there is not one place on earth that has not been colonised by some form of virus and in many respects we are living in viral world. Our evolutionary journey has been followed by a vast number of viruses, even to the extent that some virus DNA has been incorporated into our genome. We are exposed to constant attacks from infectious and harmful viruses in every instance of our lives, we are just not aware of it. It is only when we exhibit symptoms of a viral infection that this becomes apparent. Perhaps it would be more fruitful to look at corruption as we look at viruses, i.e. corruption would then be seen as always being present, it would be seen as part of our society and the way we organise our lives. Corruption would not be something that appears and then goes away, but instead a phenomenon that is present but not visible until *symptoms* occur. Viruses are also extremely abundant and it might very well be the case that they are required to keep our immune system in check and on the alert. For example, there are theories stating that allergies and other

autoimmune diseases are increasing because we are less frequently exposed to foreign particles and organisms. If corruption, just as viruses, is a natural part of society and thus constantly represents a threat to organisations it might actually be a necessary evil as it keeps operations in line with ethical and moral guidelines.

To end this note we add a final comment on what we regard as the most important point: In many of the descriptions of corruption we have come across, corruption in itself often seems to have been given its own inherent force: corruption as such makes individuals, groups, organisations, institutions and even societies corrupt by attacking them as some kind of mysterious power. A simple but clear example of this is when stating that corruption *spreads like a virus*. The image produced by a statement like that goes hand in hand with how most of us perceive viruses; as a dangerous and invisible being with the evil intent of infecting us, even killing us, just to ensure its own survival. But can corruption really be said to be a force external from human agency and is it really so that corruption is different to any other notion of social behaviour? The social world is made up by human action and corruption is obviously not an exception to this. It is also in this instance that it becomes obvious how the virus metaphor once again blinds us; it blurs the fact that corruption is guided and produced by human decisions and actions. Human agency is moved into the shadows and replaced by *the virus*.

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