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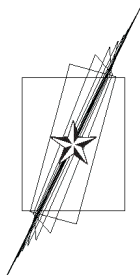
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From the Editor

Air Travel Gone Big—Passenger Safety, Social Sciences, and Innovations

Our world has more than 100,000 commercial flights daily, tens of millions yearly. In 2018 and 2019, according to Statista, we had 38.1 and 39.4 million of these flights, respectively. Globally—and every single day of the year—we have millions of passengers found at the airports and in flights. With liberalizing national economies across many nooks and crannies of the world, passenger traffic—4.0 billion in 2017 and 4.3 billion in 2018 based on the International Civil Aviation Organization data—will further increase, thus assuring the industry (i.e., airlines and airports, including their armies of professionals and workers) of robust sales and revenues from passenger tickets, terminal fees, and allied products and services.

Like its macro-level counterparts, the industry is mandated to serve the core needs of passengers, and thanks to their rising social status as well as their heightened sensitization to air travel-related rights, passengers are more than emboldened nowadays than ever to demand better products and services. Although many have yet to follow suit, some airports and airlines are already promptly responding to the core demands of their passengers. In fact, a few of them have become or are becoming passenger-centric—that is, they now are routinely integrating the core needs of passengers, particularly that related to safety, into the design of the core functionality of their products and services.

Broadly speaking, passenger safety is about being cared for by the industry—both by airlines and airports—so that no one among the riding public is harmed, injured, and killed while passengers are in the process of accessing the relevant products and services. Passenger safety, which is really about well-being, is determined by manifold factors—for instance, at the industry level, these factors include policies, physical structures, processes, and service providers in their combined or independent roles. Passenger safety begins as industry responsibility when a person successfully books a flight and ends when that person concludes a flight. In between, passenger safety is industry responsibility across several processes—when a passenger enters the terminal, deposits luggage at the check-in counter, submits to the immigration section for clearance (for international departure), waits for flight departure at the airport, embarks on a flight, sits through a flight, disembarks from a flight, presents himself or herself to the immigration section for clearance (for international arrival), collects luggage, and exits the terminal. Passenger safety is even industry responsibility when a passenger—at post-flight—takes an airport-accredited vehicle to head to a hotel, home, beach, mountain, or elsewhere.

The policies, physical structures, processes, and service providers of the industry, which have been put in place according to international systems and standards, are surely conceived with passenger safety in mind. But what is designed is not always followed. We know pretty well that many countries worldwide, for many and varied reasons, are only weakly implementing the systems and standards. Some countries, including those in the Asia-Pacific, are not well guided by the culture on public safety, not to mention that they are beset with the responsibility of having to serve thousands upon thousands of passengers daily, yet their roster of personnel is far from adequate. The dearth of enabling conditions in many of these countries thus makes passengers safety a big challenge, which is further worsened by the rampant systematic exploitation that several industry and non-

industry actors have been performing on passengers. With a multitude of actors—along with a dizzying array of processes revolving around the operational aspects of the industry 24/7/365—the circumstances of compromising passenger safety are enormous. Fortunately, these circumstances rarely include fatal airline accidents. In 2018, as reported by CNN, our world had only one such accident out of three million flights recorded that year; thus, our probability of dying from an airline accident during that year was 0.000033%—and there is nary an indication that the said probability is going north. The message is crystal clear: the commercial aircraft we fly in is very safe indeed. Instead of worrying too much about plane accidents, we need to focus on other aspects of the industry.

For example, we can revisit industry policies and examine how their non-execution or weak enforcement threatens passenger safety. One most commonly-ignored policy has been on the flight delay. Based on some criteria, airlines are mandated to supply food and accommodation to passengers in the event of a flight delay. Unfortunately, this policy is only infrequently followed. Passengers are always carrying the consequential burden of flight delays whose reasons are explained by airlines in so many innovative (i.e., untruthful) ways so that they could skirt the rule. At times, they keep silent about the delay, thus leaving passengers to speculate as to its reason as well as to get very angry.

Moreover, we can take a closer look at airport terminals and enumerate their manifold inadequacies that are, glaringly, a direct assault at passenger safety. These inadequacies include overcrowding (thus the lack of seats), poor ventilation, leaking roofs, uncomfortable and soiled seats, few and far between comfort rooms, no or faulty water fountain, exorbitant food prices, unfair money exchange rates, absence of high-speed Internet and charging outlets, and loose terminal security (thereby allowing shady individuals to conduct their nefarious activities within airport premises). We can likewise revisit the numerous processes passengers have to go through at airports and realize that these, too, compromise passenger well-being and safety. The processes involving check-in (e.g., too slow), security inspection (e.g., intrusive body frisking), immigration (e.g., moves at a turtle pace), and boarding (e.g., lacking order)—given the passenger volumes—take so much time to complete and are unnecessarily exhausting to many passengers. We can moreover consider those service providers whose sub-par level performance only helps erode passenger safety. For instance, they are unprepared to properly respond to a passenger's query, dismissive of a complaint, rude, harassers, discriminatory, arrogant, and corrupt, such as when an immigration officer demands grease money.


The preceding, which are based on personal and collective observation and experience and anecdotal and reportorial information, represent but a tiny fraction of the circumstances in which passenger safety is at peril. There could be many more that are happening and would be happening region-wide, but these would likely be unreported to authorities (because of lack of supportive societal and institutional norm), or even if these are reported, they are likely to be kept only in the files of airlines and airports, hidden from public knowledge. Because passenger safety is at the heart of the goal of social development, it behooves the social sciences to systematically identify these circumstances so that these can be recognized officially as industry challenges for which solutions must be found and carried out. In particular, the social sciences can undertake a systematic examination of the extent (using surveys) and contexts (using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions) of how the industry's policies, airport operations and processes, and service provision are impacting passenger safety. Careful thought has to be bestowed to extricating the potential mediating role of social structures, such as sex, age, and social class, because practices or malpractices are frequently exercised against the powerless or less powerful.

The Asia-Pacific Social Science Review (Scopus, now Q1) has to publish articles on air passenger safety whose significance to the region, as the world's travel growth center, is immense. Air travel is a lived experience for the region's citizens—in particular, an aspirational phenomenon for them, a manifestation of their rising social status, and an indicator of their social performance on the global and international stage. Amidst the glorious imageries and endless shared stories about air travel are its hidden dark aspects that are threatening the present and the future of passenger safety. It is precisely within this view that passenger safety has to be problematized and pursued as a research agenda towards the end of finding a solution.

Part of the solutions must involve Internet-based technologies. I am uninclined to think that the airline and airport industry—using only raw human-to-human education, persuasion, and conscience-cultivation—will be able to completely police and stop its own ranks as well as the non-industry actors (and their nefarious activities) from

continuously eroding passenger safety. The traveling public will be central to the solution. Via an Internet-based app, passengers can be informed and empowered so that they exercise their fundamental rights. At its most basic form, the app has to be designed as a guide, a reporter, a navigator, a locator, an updater, an enabler and all, the overarching purpose of which is to improve every passenger's safety (within the parameters prescribed by law for the industry). For example, when a flight is delayed, the app should automatically send passengers a message in their mobile gadgets about the time of the revised schedule—and when the delay is long, it supplies them as well with digital information on food allocation or hotel accommodation. Passengers can then present their digital code to the designated food outlet and hotel to access the resources. Moreover, the app should be able to inform passengers of the locations of functional toilets at the airport as well as to provide an option for passengers to photograph and report non-functioning facilities to exact authorities (and to get a receipt and a status update). Similarly, the app should be pro-active in informing passengers of overcrowding at the immigration counter and the approximate time it would take them to go through the passport control procedure. Should passengers get threatened at the immigration counter, the app can offer them an option to convey their concern to the exact authority real-time—and the authority to come to their aid right away (with the presumption that this authority is well-abreast of the culture of passenger safety). The app can similarly be used by the industry to provide passengers with a flight food menu once the latter has officially booked a flight. Using the digital menu, passengers can click on their choice/s, which would then enable the airline to determine the exact numbers and categories of the food selections before the flight, and subsequently, to provide passengers with their exact food choice/s during the flight. While in flight, the app can be further utilized by passengers to request for water, wine, or blanket (or even to pre-order duty-free goods). The proposed utilities for the Internet-based app need to be continually refined and harmonized so that the technology becomes one whole functional piece of innovation for passenger safety.

The social sciences can be tapped to assist in the conception, testing, evaluation, roll out, and improvement of the app. Given the air travel innovations that some airlines have already introduced into the market, the proposed app—in its fully functional form—would be just some time away from fruition (airlines, airports, the business sector, and the riding public must work together on this product). Although we are into ideas generation, I am even thinking of an app for paperless and contactless air travel, where passport and interaction with immigration and security check officers would already be things of the past. The vast human experience to be had when all these apps are already in use would be highly instructive, and we ought to document, digest, and share its ramifications for passenger safety.



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