



Six Aspects of Daily Life Rapidly Changed by COVID-19

The pandemic has impacted every aspect of life, and sped up pre-existing trends in how people consume, work and travel – but will these dramatic shifts last?

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When the pandemic struck, many countries were quick to close their borders, turning inward in the scramble to protect lives and livelihoods. Sadly, the crisis has done little to bond nations against this shared, invisible foe – in some cases, blame for the outbreak and rows over responses actually exacerbating geopolitical tensions.

However, some effects of COVID-19 may yet unite us, in the profound ways the disease has impacted almost every part of life across the planet, giving us a rare opportunity to pause and consider how we live. News of an effective vaccine makes the prospect of a ‘return to normality’ more hopeful but have these dramatic accelerations in existing trends already changed how we travel, work, and consume, and the face of our cities for good?

1. Energy and emissions: A chance for change

National lockdowns have had an immediate impact on the energy sector, both in terms of consumption and production. The result has been a slump in electricity demand unparalleled since the Great Depression, according to the International Energy Agency (IEA).



— Illustration: Kingsley Nebechi

Usage has typically fallen by up to 20 per cent² for each month of lockdown, creating what the IEA has described as a ‘prolonged Sunday’ of extended low-level consumption. Although homeworking has increased domestic electricity use by around 40 per cent, this has not been enough to offset the demand lost due to the closure of offices and factories.

Overall global power use is predicted to fall by around six per cent in 2020 compared to the previous year. Antony Froggatt, deputy director of the Energy, Environment and Resources (EER) programme, says there has also been a drop in demand for oil and gas – exacerbating an existing pattern of market decline.

The other prominent trend has been the increase in renewable energy production and use. ‘This experience shows that renewables technology can overcome intermittency issues, in the case of Europe at least, and that existing grids are able to cope with a higher percentage of renewables,’ says Froggatt. ‘In the last six months renewables have jumped to a place we would have expected to see them reach in the next five years or more.’

40%

of the UK’s energy output is now from renewables, well above half the energy produced in some European countries.

Fellow EER colleagues Glada Lahn and Siân Bradley, in a July comment for the OECD², see ‘conflicting drivers of demand and investment in fossil fuels ... with some governments seeking an entrenched return to normal and others aiming to catalyse green growth’. They say ‘the COVID-19 crisis could accelerate the global transition or reinforce carbon dependencies, setting the world on track for a later – and even more disruptive – reset’.

Last spring’s drop in the oil price has shaken producer countries, many of whom were already indebted, says Lahn.

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Countries that were planning growth based on fossil fuel extraction have the chance to choose a more stable, low carbon pathway for development. Established producers face renewed pressure to both reform policy and invest to break their cycle of dependence on a volatile export market in long-term decline.

Glada Lahn, Energy, Environment and Resources programme

EER's Daniel Quiggin is not optimistic about the signs from richer countries, citing the fact that by June the 50 largest economies had have targeted only 0.2 per cent of \$12 trillion worth[↗] of recovery packages at low-carbon sectors.

‘The signs are fairly awful, with most developed economies targeting traditional sectors. This is a missed opportunity, given that every \$1 million in spending generates 7.5 full-time jobs in renewables infrastructure, 7.7 in energy efficiency, but only 2.7 in fossil fuels.’

In addition, China is the ‘clear canary in the coal mine’, having quickly returned emissions to pre-crisis levels – although it has surprised many by recently committing to an ambitious zero carbon target by 2060.

Climate scientists expect that 2020 emissions will likely fall by 4-7%[↗]. To meet the crucial 1.5°C threshold for stabilizing the climate from the mid-2040s, we need to see a similar drop in emissions[↗] (7.6%) take place each year for at least the next decade.

2. Dramatically inhibited travel



— Illustration: Kingsley Nebechi

During lockdown, countries including the US reported drops in road traffic to levels not seen since the 1950s. At their peak, the number of vehicles on the road fell by more than 70 per cent. Air travel has plummeted by around 80 per cent globally[↗] with Europe most affected and the UK's Heathrow airport reporting a 97 per cent decline in passenger numbers in April 2020 compared to 2019.

Many airlines are facing collapse in the absence of further government bailouts, and the future of the travel industry is uncertain. Even with ideas for more radical decarbonization of airlines

gaining some momentum via proposed electric planes and alternative fuels, these are still years from becoming reality, says Bernice Lee, founding director of the [Hoffmann Centre](#)².

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There is no clear substitution for long-distance air travel yet, making this a challenging area to decarbonize, and making the need for innovation in aviation all the more urgent.

Bernice Lee, Executive Founding Director, Hoffmann Centre

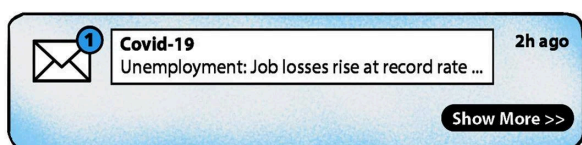
Major cities such as Milan, London and Rome have taken the opportunity to further the expansion of pedestrian and cycling zones, loosening regulations around e-scooters and reclaiming areas with temporary dedicated lanes that could become permanent in a bid to tackle air pollution, noise, and emissions – and to maintain social distancing. But worries over the safety of public transport could see a spike in car use and ownership, potentially pushing emissions beyond pre-lockdown levels.

Quiggin believes the cost of electric vehicles (EVs) will continue to fall and reach price parity with combustion vehicles – the use of green hydrogen is also likely to rise. ‘Clearly the automotive sector is a massive employer, and thus EVs represent a means to retain jobs, while potentially leading to falls in greenhouse gas emissions. As such, tax breaks should be targeted at the auto sector conditional on EV production targets.’

63%

increase in bicycle sales year on year in the UK between April and June 2020.

3. Work is being redefined



The value placed on different members of the workforce and supply chain has been – temporarily, at least – redefined. There has been some increased recognition of ‘key’ workers and essential frontline staff, from health and care workers to teachers, supermarket staff and delivery drivers, says Ana

— Illustration: Kingsley Nebechi

Yang, acting executive director of the Hoffmann Centre.

‘But how or if this will translate into better longer-term pay and recognition, however, remains to be seen,’ she says. ‘The virus has also exposed vast societal inequalities, with zero-hours employees the most vulnerable to losing their jobs and workers in factories, warehouses and taxis being forced to make the decision to risk infection rather than lose precious income.’

Working from home has become standard for millions of white-collar employees, replacing daily commutes and meetings with flexible hours and virtual conference calls. Some organizations have been quick to jettison expensive city offices – with sectors such as finance and technology reporting ‘unquestionable’ higher productivity and happier staff with the new work–life balance.

Twitter was one of the first major organizations to announce staff could work from home indefinitely. As former Twitter vice-president Bruce Daisley told the Chatham House [Undercurrents](#) podcast: ‘I largely believe that the office as we know it has gone. There has been such a forced reappraisal ... the idea of doing a commute to one place every day for almost every organization will be something that no longer feels necessary.’

Some months in, many are now emphasizing the social role of the office and how contact with colleagues is underestimated in terms of its benefits for mental health and productivity.

Experts gathered to discuss this shift at Chatham House’s [Reinventing Meetings](#) event. According to Aude Bicquelet-Lock of the Royal Town Planning Institute, collaborative projects take longer and training is harder in a remote context.

Laïla von Alvensleben of MURAL says the acceleration in the trend has surprised those already working remotely. ‘We could see the way the trend was going, but then it was just, boom!’ She adds that hybrid working models – with a mix of office based teams and remote workers are more likely to be used in the future.

Elizabeth Bieniek, director of innovation at Cisco Collaboration, agrees. She notes the pandemic has not just tested the strength and security of systems but is changing how we work remotely.

She thinks virtual reality (VR), intelligent AI and hologram meetings could all help to make online meetings feel more ‘natural’ in future. ‘People don’t change, we are relational people, we

like to interact ... we are community-driven, social creatures ... as the technology is evolving, we're seeing things like augmented VR coming more to the centre ... which replicates what you can do face to face in a physical environment.'

4. Warning of future 'ghost' cities



— Illustration: Kingsley Nebechi

The built environment has experienced an impact from the crisis. In recent years, cities in developing countries have continued to grow as a result of inward migration from rural areas, but the pandemic has seen an acceleration of cities in developed countries trending in the opposite direction, as increasing numbers of workers have headed to the suburbs and beyond – this has led some like the UK's Confederation of British Industry (CBI) to warn of future 'ghost cities'.

Bicquelet-Lock is more upbeat, acknowledging that smaller towns could boom in hybrid working, emerging as new, active hubs as people increasingly shun long commutes for more localized

'micromobility'.

In a partnership with the London Design Biennale, Chatham House has launched an initiative calling for radical ideas to current crises, via a [call to the global design community](#).

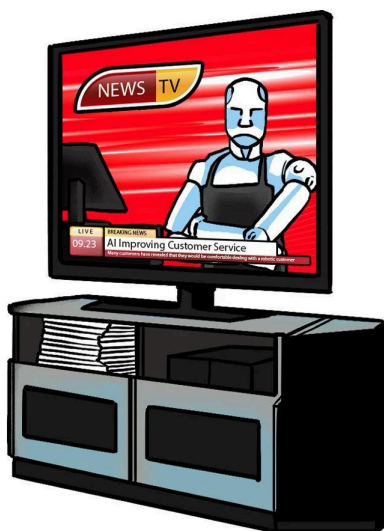
One of the submission themes is a move to a more 'village' lifestyle. Some, such as Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo, had already promoted this very idea. Just before the pandemic fully struck Europe, she laid out her vision of the ['15-minute city'](#)²⁸ where work, produce and services are radically more localized within cycling and walking distance and less car-centric.

Others now see these innovative, greener city initiatives as the only real way of protecting the environment. Chatham House's [SNF Colab initiative](#) will launch a digital model next year of an imagined central London 100 years in the future.

Rose Abdollahzadeh, who is coordinating the project, says: ‘Our consultations to create a positive projection of a future city led us to conclude that by 2035 large parts of central London would be pedestrianized and there would be a significant shift towards e-bikes and scooters as alternative forms of personal transport. But moves by many global cities in response to the pandemic show that we could get there much sooner.’

But with millions of square feet of city centre real estate standing empty, Biquelet-Lock says there are ‘no quick fixes’. And all warn of the risks of certain sections of society – for example, women and deprived communities – once again being left behind. A similar fear applies to developing countries more broadly.

5. ‘Big Tech’ has both winners and losers



— Illustration: Kingsley Nebechi

One of the drivers behind the demise of high-street retail has been the continued expansion of online giants such as Amazon, whose profits and stock have soared. However, more broadly, the coronavirus outbreak has negatively affected businesses.

‘Many sectors that require a physical customer presence, such as travel and traditional retail, are being wiped out,’ says Jennifer Zhu Scott in the Asia-Pacific programme. Remote working platforms such as Zoom have boomed ‘while many tech start-ups focusing on enterprise sales have been starved [of custom] during the lockdown. However, those empowering traditional industries using AI will enjoy pent-up growth - if they can survive until the

pandemic is over,’ she adds.

Sophia Ignatidou, an associate with the International Security programme, says we will likely see a rise of robots with supermarkets already using them to package goods and Italian hospitals even employing robots to disinfect wards.

‘Employers may see potential in outsourcing more tasks to countries with lower labour costs, or impose employee surveillance technologies to ensure and quantify productivity,’ she says.

The use of big data, AI and technology such as facial recognition has played a huge role so far in the pandemic. Technological applications from ‘research to compliance monitoring’ seem to have been effective and/or controversial in almost equal measure. As an example of the latter case, tracing apps have been criticized for their lack of privacy safeguards, and digital ‘immunity certificates’ have been called a ‘looming disaster’ by Privacy International, says Ignatidou.

Most agree AI is here to stay but ‘there is the risk of the public being subjected to tech-mediated policies that it hasn’t consented to’, she says. Other technology in medicine, such as remote consultations, are seen as less problematic, says Global Health programme fellow Dr Ngozi Erundu.

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With the precarious situation of healthcare systems for the next year or more, I think telemedicine will definitely be here to stay. This is a great opportunity to streamline and improve telemedicine and help healthcare run more smoothly.

Dr Ngozi Erundu, Associate Fellow, Global Health programme

She says: ‘In countries where universal health coverage is still not in place, this can be a starting point to equitable access to affordable healthcare.’

6. Fragility of food supply has been exposed

Professor Tim Benton, director of the EER programme, observes many were surprised at how easily the fragility of ‘just-in-time’ economies of food supply was exposed even with massive state interventions behind the scenes – in part, this was because shortages were actually driven more by increases in demand with panic-buying rather than by reduced supply.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of smaller, local supply networks that managed to respond and adapt rapidly to local communities’ needs when national and international chains were interrupted.