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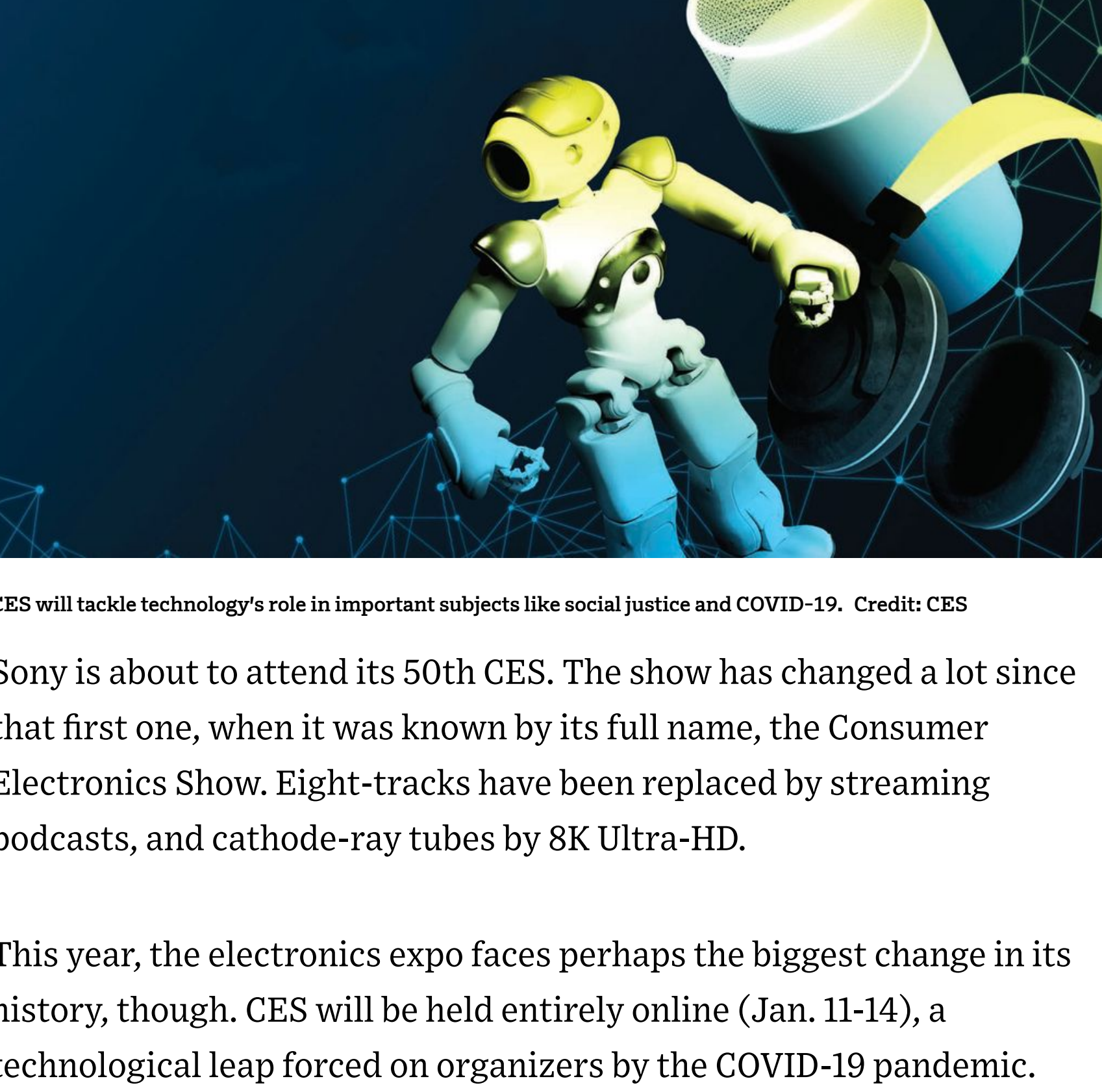
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Special Report: CES

# CAN TECHNOLOGY SAVE CES?

The electronics extravaganza hopes the future of innovation now lies with its first online-only conference

By Garrett Sloane, Published on January 06, 2021.



CES will tackle technology's role in important subjects like social justice and COVID-19. Credit: CES

Sony is about to attend its 50th CES. The show has changed a lot since that first one, when it was known by its full name, the Consumer Electronics Show. Eight-tracks have been replaced by streaming podcasts, and cathode-ray tubes by 8K Ultra-HD.

This year, the electronics expo faces perhaps the biggest change in its history, though. CES will be held entirely online (Jan. 11-14), a technological leap forced on organizers by the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of the Las Vegas Strip and Convention Center, there will be Microsoft Teams and videoconferencing.

The move to an all-digital CES was not an easy one for the Consumer Technology Association, the industry trade group that produces the show. A crucial part of the event has always been the live reveal of new gadgetry and the ability for attendees to meet face-to-face.

Cheryl Goodman, head of corporate communications at Sony Electronics, says that with the virtual CES kicking off on Monday, there are signs of hope. CES was built to showcase the future, and telecommuting and virtual events are the foreseeable future.

“If, as a technology association, you couldn’t convene a technology discussion using technology, then we would have concerns,” Goodman says in a phone interview. “But I’m actually really pleased, as is Sony, that the CTA has pivoted, and said, ‘You know we’re fully going to embrace a digital platform.’ And it was no small feat on their part.”

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Sony is among the list of electronics manufacturers, consumer product brands and tech companies exhibiting at CES. Next week’s attendees will include Procter & Gamble, Canon, Samsung, LG, Panasonic and more. The CTA built a conference portal in partnership with Microsoft, partly based on Microsoft Teams. The list of virtual exhibitors won’t match the usual level of participation in Las Vegas, however, where the show typically attracts 4,500 companies that set up booths in the convention center.

This year, there is a digital directory that will feature about 1,800 exhibitors, according to Jean Foster, senior VP of marketing and communications at CTA. The web site for CES 2021 shows the line-up of speakers and panels. Attendees can schedule meetings and break off into more personal conversations online. There also is flexibility built into the program for brands to showcase their products and innovations.

For instance, while CTA organizers considered adopting a virtual-reality framework, where perhaps people could interact as avatars, they ended up going with a simpler approach. But brands like P&G can test their own virtual reality tours in their private digital spaces.

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Goodman says that Sony will host three digital sessions; a press conference and two spotlight sessions. CTA built these types of promoted events into its sponsorship packages, which can range in price, starting at \$1,200 and reaching \$25,000 to \$85,000, according to CES pitch decks obtained by Ad Age. The pitch deck below is for the top-tier sponsorship package.

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November/ December	CES audience recruitment
December 1	Registration opens
December 8	Digital venue opens for scheduling appointments
December 18	Exhibitor Dashboard freezes for asset review and post production
January 1	Exhibitor Dashboard available for final updates
January 11-14	CES 2021
January 11	Exclusive media-only access
January 12	Exhibitor showcase and conference programming
January 13	Exhibitor showcase and conference programming
January 14	Partner conference programming
January 15-February 15	Digital venue remains open for connections and viewing content

“We want to make sure that we’re bringing the industry together, and this year was all about giving these companies the platform, just as we would do in Las Vegas,” Foster says. “We wanted to make sure that we gave them that platform, and we tried not to make it cost-prohibitive for many of these companies.

“If you think about a physical CES even, we have 1,200 startups come to Las Vegas. ... We had to make sure there was also room for those startup companies that have some really cool tech. We’re catering to all of those different requirements for each of the exhibitors, depending on what activation [they are doing] and where they are,” she adds.

Money that sponsors would have spent to produce a live CES event instead goes into social media promotion and polished video presentations, Goodman says. “It’s a bit of a shift on the logistics, which creates stress for anyone in the industry,” she says. “Our performance pressure is really high because you’re competing for the attention of someone who has possibly sat in their chair for 12 hours that day.”

**Pre-show jitters**

Early in the pandemic, there had been faint hope that, come January, part of the event could still be held in person.

“The intent, even deeper into the quarantine, deeper into the pandemic, the intent was still to try to make it happen physically, have people come to Las Vegas,” says Julian Mitchell, who is a co-founder of IQ-Labs, which consults with CTA’s advisory board on producing CES. “Maybe it’s limited, maybe the sessions are cut down, but the idea was still to have it in person. But obviously, over time, it shifted.”

Mitchell, as a consultant, has helped with CES programming over the past three years. Like most of the organizers and attendees, Mitchell will miss the excitement of Las Vegas. “Everybody was in Las Vegas, so you had all of the big brands activating throughout the Strip,” Mitchell says. “You had tons of people traveling from all over the world. You understand how big that event is.”

Mitchell says the remote CES opens new pathways though for the show, which at its core is about the future. “OK. If this is going to be fully digital, and this is the first time ever that this conference has been completely digital, how can this platform which is CES, this global platform for technology and innovation, how can it be used to have conversation about what the new future looks like,” Mitchell says.

It’s not just major electronics companies and household name-brands that make up CES. Part of the allure of the show has always been the media, advertising and technology world that attends. It’s a time for major holding companies—Omnicom, WPP, IPG, Havas, Dentsu-Aegis, Publicis—to bring their teams and fete clients.

There is an aura of deal-making that takes place in Las Vegas that will be hard to re-imagine online. There are signs that some of the biggest tech companies are planning only minor appearances at the virtual CES. Twitter, Facebook and Amazon, for instance, usually send a large contingent to Las Vegas to pitch their upcoming media and advertising technologies. This year, they are all planning less activity associated with CES, according to people familiar with their plans.

MediaLink, which is owned by Ascential, is one of the most important partners at CES. The famed MediaLink party kicks off CES annually, and is one of the most coveted invites of the year.

Michael Kassan, CEO of MediaLink, is still organizing the C Space, a mini-conference within CES, to hold digital panels related to media and advertising. MediaLink will try to muster its hot-ticket mystique with an online event featuring Dua Lipa and Billie Eilish.

The ad world has been a little hesitant about CES, though, according to industry executives. The CTA maintained pricing for exhibitors at levels that were similar to past years. And companies that are concerned about budgets this year might have been reluctant to invest too heavily in the digital CES experiment.

“The highest level package they offered is quite pricey, coming in at around \$80,000,” says one ad agency executive, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Ad Age obtained pitch decks from CTA, promoting the digital activations that start at \$1,200 and run up to \$85,000. The sponsorship levels vary, offering a basic online showroom to more in-depth programming, including special sessions and presentations.

Microsoft was the main technology partner that built the custom interface for CES. “We’re calling it the digital venue to create this environment,” CTA’s Foster says.

There will be streaming video at the center of the show, with an anchor desk for CES media teams to narrate the action. The largest exhibitors will get special access to livestream conferences to digital rooms that hold up to 2,500 attendees, Foster says. Companies can also create microsites as extensions of their virtual showcase.

“It will be interesting to see how they run it virtually; it’s not going to be the same, not being able to see the products in real life,” says John Tubert, senior VP of technology at R/GA. “I imagine there will be kinds of big reveals and big presentations. What I’m kind of wondering more is the exhibit part of it. I hope that they do a more personalized way to be able to experience some of those things, or being able to ask questions more directly to different companies.”

**Beyond big money**

While it will be hard to mimic the excitement online, there is still important work to be done, Mitchell says. The schedule highlights the key issues confronting all industries and technology. There is the global health crisis that technology can help mitigate. Also, social justice is on the agenda, with speakers talking about the importance of diversity and corporate responsibility, Mitchell says.

“This is just something that I’m passionate about, that I feel like there was definitely a focused effort on this year, too,” Mitchell says. “Knowing that coming out of this last year, it’s bigger than just consumer electronics, big brands, and big money. It’s also about social impact and social responsibility and being progressive beyond just new technology and innovation.”

Mitchell will speak on topics like the future of smart cities and connectivity, and he says he looks forward to hearing Black industry leaders like Annie Jean-Baptiste, head of product inclusion at Google, and Kenny Mitchell, chief marketing officer at Snap.

Goodman says Sony will have deeper subjects to explore at the show, too. “Everything from social justice issues this year to the COVID fund that we launched, [we’re] really speaking truth and relevance into why we are doing the show in the way we are doing, and how it’s changed how businesses run,” she says.

The backdrop of the pandemic also presents an urgent setting for many of the technologies that companies had already been talking about for years. For instance, P&G will set up its LifeLab exhibit, which has been at CES in Las Vegas the past two years, but this year it will be a 360-degree virtual showroom. “As we have in years past, the new LifeLab Everyday will feature cutting-edge innovations in health, hygiene and consumer devices from our home care, fabric care, and oral care categories,” P&G said in its announcement. “In addition this year, we’ll showcase transformative innovations that leverage technology for good to improve global sustainability, starting at home.”

CTA organizers have said they hope that the digital show could serve as a template for the future of the event, which will return to Las Vegas but also offer this new digital sideshow. There are drawbacks to conducting business entirely online, but it undoubtedly opens the potential for more people to see the spectacle.

It’s an opportunity to “collapse borders of access,” Sony’s Goodman says.

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