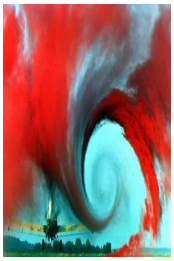
1. Articles



Covid-19: Are we heading for a ‘new normal’ and does it matter?

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The restrictions in mobility that have accompanied the lockdown and subsequent staged release of lockdown in response to Covid-19 have created the conditions for some quite radical natural experiments in social adaptation. In this article I reflect on what we can learn about the importance of collective social norms in making more transformative social change work. I argue that whilst there is both great potential in some of the adaptations to set us on a more climate compliant pathway, there are also strong historic and political reasons that may limit what results. More generally, as events unfold we learn more and more about the importance of collective norms in achieving transformative shifts in behaviour rather than focussing just on what the individual can do.

Even six months ago it would have been difficult to imagine the scale of upheaval which societies around the globe have, and continue to experience as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. As someone working in the field of transport and climate policy, it was certainly unimaginable that governments would impose such draconian mobility restrictions to stop the spread of the virus. Restrictions on mobility which were said to be “too difficult” for the purposes of tacking air quality, road safety, overnight became subject to fines or prosecution to protect public health and overburdened health services.

Going beyond the “norm” to rethink the way we move

Between 2011 and 2014 I worked with colleagues from across the UK on a project entitled ‘Disruption’, built on the premise that we could learn more about how behaviour could be changed in more substantial ways if we looked at significant events or disruptions, where people had to adapt. This contrasts to the typical approach which is to make improvements to a service or amendments to public transport fares or adding a new piece of infrastructure and see how this influences what people do. The work covered flooding, long-term snow and ice events, bridge closures and the London Olympics; so nothing that looked or felt like a pandemic. We learnt that people exhibit a much wider bank of behavioural responses than is typically considered in transport, including reallocating tasks across the household and business and rescheduling activities across weeks and even months. [1] However, one of the more intriguing findings which is very relevant to today was the importance of ‘norms’. In each of our studies we found a recognition that prior assumptions about the need to travel, the need for diversity of shopping opportunities or the need to be in work were all up for rethinking. This is not a property of individuals but instead a negotiation between different parts of society, business and government about what is expected or what is normal for any type of activity. Some of this is formalised, as with the lockdown rules, but some of it is informal and about how we collectively experience situations and act.

There is a bank of work on understanding disruptions which comes from outside of the transport domain but which talks to these issues. [2] Sociologist Hendrik Vollmer brought this together in a 2013 book on “The Sociology of Disaster, Disruption and Social Change” where he suggested that what gets disrupted is the “coordination of activities and expectations” within a collective entity. [3] That chimes with our findings but is also incredibly pertinent to the lived experience of travel lockdowns and the slow release of restrictions to a so-called “new normal”. Whilst the phrase “new normal” is overused and probably unhelpful (see below), what is important in this framing is the creation of new expectations or norms about what we should do and how we might achieve this.

We cannot, and will not, go back

Much of the media reporting on the transport impacts of Covid-19 has focussed on empty roads, buses and trains or airports with planes parked at stands. How quickly will traffic bounce back and will it grow past where it was pre-Covid, the so called Wuhan Effect? [4] However, this misses the point. Transport is a derived demand and so if we want to understand what will happen to travel we need to look at how the activities we take part in are altered and to think about the relationships between physical and virtual accessibility. Such an approach points to some much more fundamental shifts in norms and ways of doing things than would otherwise be in view. If we start with working from home, which in the UK has proven feasible for around 40% of the workforce, there has been a massive switch in norms. [5] Roles which previously had to be done in the office (and were contractually bound to be so) were, overnight asked to be done from home. Workshops and seminars which people travelled for moved to on-line platforms. The prestige of moving about has been replaced for now with a recognition of the value of avoiding movement where it is possible to do so. Presenteeism and scepticism about home working has been modified with new ways of interacting and demonstrating value coming to the fore. I am not advancing an argument here for one state of affairs being better or worse in some easily calculable way. There are challenges to home working and inequities in it, but some aspects have been more inclusive and there has been a recognition of the benefits of not commuting on a personal as well as a societal level. However, undoubtedly norms have shifted here and it is hard to see them returning to where they were before. What has been said cannot be unsaid and people’s lived experiences cannot be unlived. It is not just the first order impacts

of these changes that will matter as restrictions lift, but what happens to the organisation of companies and office space in city centres. If fewer workers are needed in one location then downsizing will follow and so too will the restructuring of the service and food industry which built up around one set of assumptions. [6] If the net effect is the use of more localised opportunities then there will be a shift in economic activities there and a new way of doing things within more localised communities could emerge.

It is not just in work where changes have been experienced. Shopping is not the activity it used to be and will continue to be a somewhat strange experience until a vaccine or treatment becomes available. The restrictions have contributed to the acceleration of on-line access for more people and to an ever wider range of goods. Local shops have also shifted to on-line and delivery based or click and collect ways of working, in some respects turning back decades to more local to local delivery approaches. Whilst the desire for some people to visit the shops will not disappear overnight, the experiences of more people doing more on-line will persist and so this will feed in to the continuing reconstitution of high street spaces away from retail.

Should we expect a “new normal” for travel?

Whilst I have focussed here in my discussion about activities and norms, it would be remiss not to turn back to transport and reflect on the extent to which a long period of being discouraged from using public transport may lead to people finding other ways to meet their needs and never going back. Similarly, there has been a major push on reallocating roadspace for walking and cycling and some notable shifts in cycling use as a result. [7] Undoubtedly, this has been an opportunity for more people to realise what can be accessed safely and conveniently in their localities by active travel.

So, is this then the “new normal”? This is an unhelpful phrase as it starts from the position that we move from one stable societal position to another; stasis or change being the only two states which exist. As our previous research suggested, disruptions are really part of the everyday, some being bigger than others. Change in what we do, where and how, is happening all of the time. We cannot and will not go back to early 2020 with all of our activities. However, neither can we airbrush out history and place too much power in the response to Covid-19. The locations of our housing relative to work, the large parts of the economy which require physical co-presence and our desire to meet, to celebrate, to watch sport or arts and participate in collective activities will all change slowly. These practices have been built up over decades and centuries and so to expect radical change to what we do is naïve. The responses brought about by Covid-19 are one of many changes to how society works which can be used to shape change. We must though, if we are to take the climate imperative seriously, seek to ensure that some of the value of localisation, travelling less and virtualisation are embedded more quickly and more significantly in our future behaviours.

I close with two reflections which suggest caution in presuming that this will come to pass and which argue for the need for any such approaches to be both strong and deliberate. At the time of our Disruption work, the narrative of getting the economy moving after the global financial crisis of 2009 was paramount in policy debates and so the practical and policy implications of our work on the opportunities to travel less did not fit. Equally, they did not fit in academic review processes where the idea that disruptions were discernible or that they were useful for thinking about carbon reduction were repeatedly rejected. Narratives are powerful and yet they move on quickly. Governments will be quick to try and minimise reflection on painful and electorally damaging experiences such as Covid-19 and will focus on recovery. This has previously focussed on “getting the economy moving”, or travelling more, whether or not that really has anything to do with growth and this may re-emerge. So, there is a coherent behavioural argument for maximising the benefits from disruptive events and a pressing policy need to do so. I believe that whether or not it will make the difference it could will depend, to no small degree, on how persistent and organised the policy coalition around these interests are relative to those who argue for different, more mobility intensive, and less progressive pathways out of the crisis.

Notes

1 Marsden, G., Anable, J., Chatterton, T., Docherty, I., Faulconbridge, J., Murray, L., Roby, H. and Shires, J., « Studying disruptive events: innovations in behaviour, opportunities for lower carbon transport policy? », Transport Policy, 2020, 94, p. 89-101. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0967070X20303012?via%3Dihub

2 Graham, S. et Thrift, N., « Out of order », Theory, Culture & Society, 2007, 24, p. 1-25.

3 Vollmar, H., The Sociology of Disruption, Disaster and Social Change ; Punctuated Cooperation, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

4 https://decarbon8.org.uk/the-wuhan-effect/

5 ONS, Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain, 19 juin 2020. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsc

6 https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jul/01/upper-crust-and-caffe-ritazza-owner-to-cut-5000-jobs-ssp-group-coronavirus

7 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/18/cleaner-and-greener-covid-19-prompts-worlds-cities-to-free-public-space-of-cars

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Lockdown

The lockdown measures implemented throughout 2020 in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, while varying from one country to the next, implied a major restriction on people’s freedom of movement for a given period. Presented as a solution to the spread of the virus, the lockdown impacted local, interregional and international travel. By transforming the spatial and temporal dimensions of people’s lifestyles, the lockdown accelerated a whole series of pre-existing trends, such as the rise of teleworking and teleshopping and the increase in walking and cycling, while also interrupting of long-distance mobility. The ambivalent experiences of the lockdown pave the way for a possible transformation of lifestyles in the future.

En savoir plus x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

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- Futures
- Representations
- Crises

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- Ecological transition

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Aniss Mouad Mezoued, Mobile Lives Forum

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