

A Futurist's Learnings From The Corona-Crisis, And Some Key Foresights

[Gerd Leonhard](#) 12:08pm EDT

'NORMAL' IS NOW AN OXYMORON

After 7 months of riding the pandemic rollercoaster, I recently experienced some penny-drop moments that I wanted to share with you. First, I realised that I need to embrace the fact that there will be no such thing as a 'going back to normal'. This is a *reset* not a mere bump in the road, it's a *pivot point* not a mere interruption. There will only be many parallel 'new normals' - and they will differ widely depending on where we are located (Switzerland, in my case), what economic situation we're in and whether our political leadership is capable or not. There is no uniform response to this crisis and the challenges it presents us with, and no 'AI' will provide us with meaningful advise on the tough social, cultural or political issues we are now facing.

The very word 'normal' has become kind of useless, and the idea of '*business as usual*' is becoming laughable, as well. Instead, attempting to '[pivot](#)' (switching horses in midstream) has become our new routine. Just ask AirBnB, Uber or Carnival Cruises, or any airline CEO, event organiser, restaurant owner or... futurist.



It's pivot time

Gerd Leonhard

What's more, what used to be considered utopian, slightly far-out or simply impossible prior to Covid-19 is now becoming a common occurrence: helicopter money, stimulus programs, furlough payments, quasi-basic income support schemes, lock-downs and quarantine measures, tracking and tracing... the list goes on.

Forget 'impossible' along with 'normal' and [reboot your world-views](#).

The Covid-19 crisis greatly accelerates what was already nascent before (the good *and* not so good), and we must therefore question our assumptions and take a wider view. Many previously cherished and well-honed revenue streams are evaporating. Think tourism, hotels, airlines, restaurants and conventions - and this is only the tip of the iceberg. Utter disruption is happening to my own business, as well: speaking at large events all over the globe is clearly not a very promising business model these days. It's all virtual, remote, video and in the cloud now, like it or not. Real-life is out.

We are shifting our thinking and adjusting to a world with/post-corona, and in many cases, 'impossible' is no longer taken for granted. This new

narrative causes considerable political tensions (as evidenced in the U.S. right now), and will be a key driver of geopolitics in the years to come. I foresee that it will also trigger dramatic action on climate-change adaptation and mitigation, finally. This may be wishful-thinking as far as Brazil, India and Russia is concerned, for now - but on the other hand Europe is emerging as a 'green recovery' leader which I find very promising. And the U.S.? Anything could happen... [but I have hope](#) for a 'great American pivot' in 2021.



Dare to imagine a great American pivoting in 2021

Gerd Leonhard

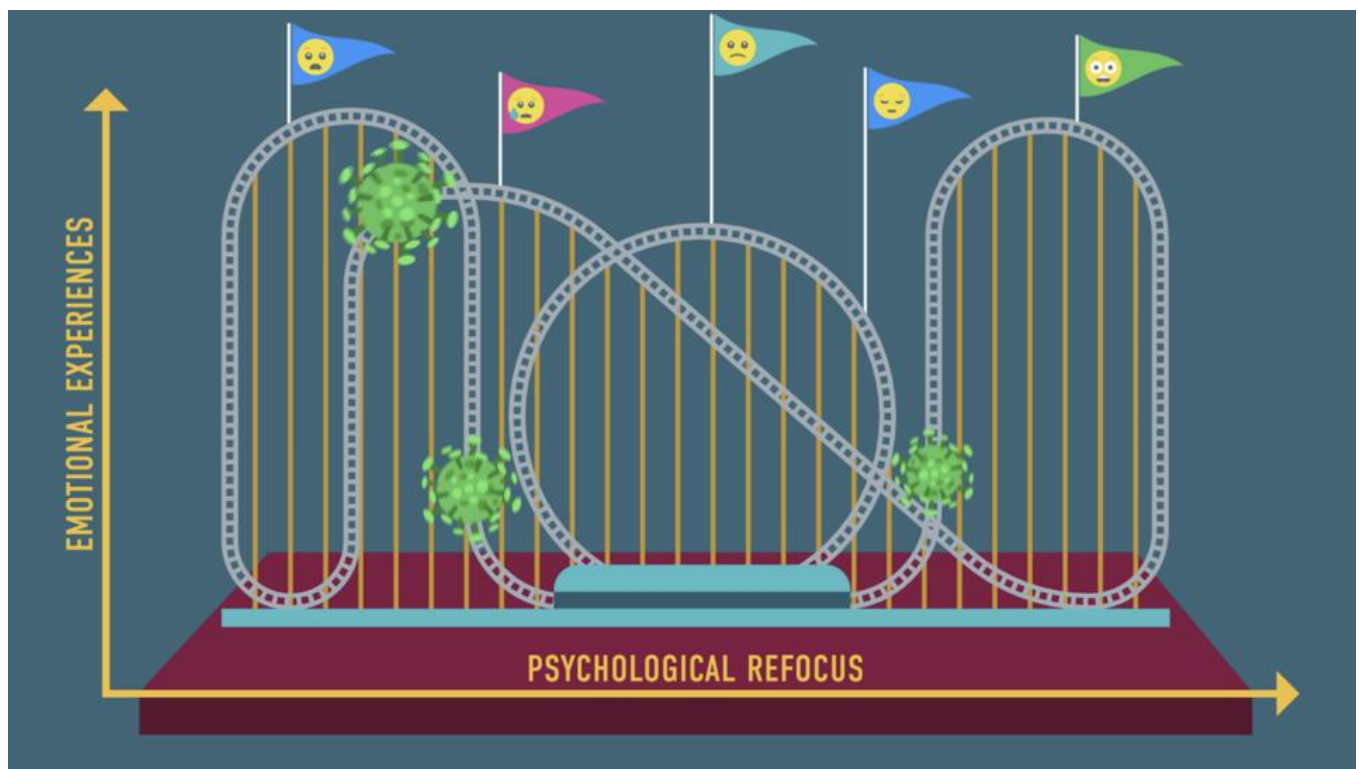
PERMANENT VUCA AHEAD

I think we have to accept that this is a time of permanent transition and perpetual VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity), at least for the next 2-3 years but probably for the entire decade. Utter uncertainty will be the prevailing default, thus resilience, solidarity, compassion, hyper-collaboration and agility will be crucial. While I have sometimes struggled to maintain a positive outlook given this reality, the importance of real-life and human-to-human interaction has come sharply back into focus for me, as well. I have talked about this a lot in my last book, already, as well as in many of my now-virtual keynotes:

Technology is fantastic, but we simply won't find [real happiness](#) (as opposed to a kind of *digital hedonism* which I guess can be a good start, too) on a screen, in the cloud, in VR or with an app. Because technology is not *what* we seek, but *how* we seek. Zoom calls are great but hugs are greater.

EXPECT MORE CORONA-COASTING

As we head into 2021, I forecast that instead of enjoying a solid and linear rebound trend we are likely to keep bouncing back and forth between different levels of 'much better and even worse' (such as with travel and meeting restrictions, social distancing, lock-downs and quarantines); even if and when a vaccine is available. This emotional and social 'CoronaCoaster' will continue - so let's make sure we are ready to support each other, for the long haul.



Welcome to the CoronaCoaster

Gerd Leonhard

CONSUMER CHANGES: WHATEVER WAS ALREADY NASCENT BECOMES REALLY BIG NOW

I have noticed that new consumer behaviours that are *accelerated* in this

crisis (rather than initiated) tend to be a lot stickier, such as remote working, online learning, e-commerce and streaming media - and many of them are likely to become default habits. Generally, I sense that there is a definitive global acceleration towards digital-everything and 'remote-everything'; albeit from very different local starting points (for example India and Brazil vs USA and EU). This trend [could be heaven or it could be hell](#) - all will depend on how we govern exponential technological progress. Determining a healthy and sustainable balance between the increasing capabilities of technology and our human needs (as well as our limitations) will be crucial. After all, "technology is morally neutral until we use it" (as William Gibson stated a long time ago).

Many consumers are now quickly trying new things but all too often are not having really great experiences (witness Zoom-fatigue, WFH challenges etc), or simply aren't quite ready to embrace - and learn - these new tools fully, hence they may return to their pre-pandemic patterns as soon as they can. And let's not forget that how exactly consumers respond to these 'new normals' will remain subject to their specific cultural and societal context (e.g. [Brazilians and Italians now seem more inclined to tune out sustainability as a priority](#), while Germans and French are not). Culture still eats technology for breakfast.

INEQUALITY HAS ONCE AGAIN PROVEN DEADLY

Societies with deeply rooted inequality issues (such as the USA, Brazil and South Africa) have become even more polarised in this crisis, as the well-off can easily protect themselves while the lesser-fortunate have to do whatever it takes to get by. A 'K-shaped' recession would mean that things may look up again, soon, for the top 10% while more misery is awaiting everyone else - this would not bode well for the future.

I have, however, observed that the traditional forms of capitalism, the 'free-markets' principle and the underlying economic logic in general are being increasingly questioned, particularly by the millennials. New paradigms such as stakeholder (not just shareholder) value and people-planet-purpose-prosperity are starting to take hold (witness the recent

launch of [Long Term Stock Exchange](#)), and sustainable capitalism (or as we frame that term here in Europe, *social capitalism*) finally arrives on the agenda again.

NEW PARADIGMS AND SHIFTING PRIORITIES: THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION

This Great Transformation is vastly accelerated by Covid-19 as the pandemic brings out both the best in us *and* the worst in us. It's causing a shake-up in our hierarchy of needs and their respective importance (for example, spending on travel is down while spending on health and wellness is up). The world is being reshuffled.



The Great Transformation

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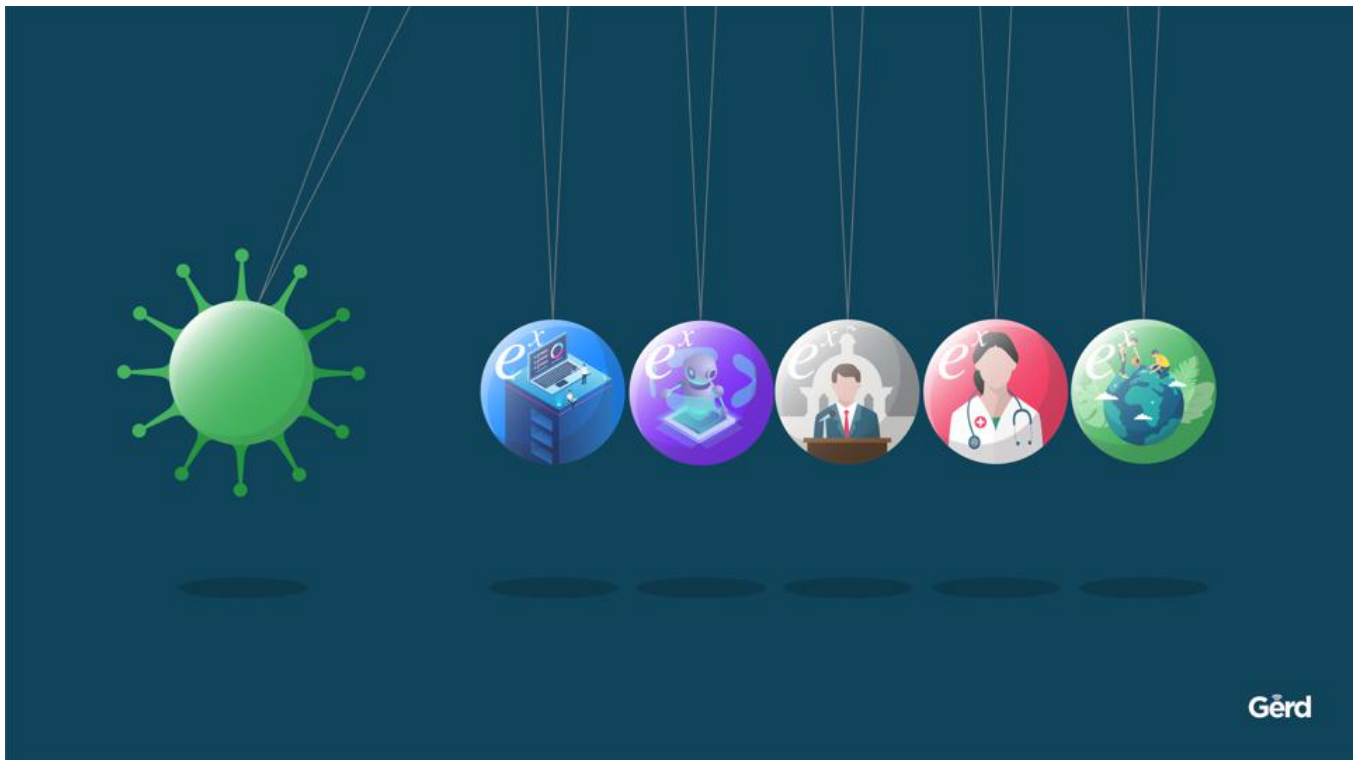
TECHNOLOGY IS THE WINNER - BUT 'TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING' IS A REAL AND PRESENT DANGER

The big winners of this crisis are (and will continue to be): big tech and big media, big health, big state and big government, and (maybe) big green. Technology is clearly super-important now, and offers exciting new possibilities to help us with this crisis, such as online collaboration

and remote teamwork. As long as we are mindful of the lure of 'become super-human, transcend human-limitations!' and Silicon Valley's shiny 'singularity traps' (see below) I think we can look forward to many exciting innovations in the years to come.

On my end, I can't wait to buy a ticket for a holographic trip right here at the Swiss counter at Zurich airport, and then hop into a Million-Dollar setup that transports me safely to Beijing just in time for my next keynote, and back home in time for dinner.

I am going deeper down the rabbit-hole of cool technology every day, myself (witness my virtual [keynote studio setup](#)), and ever more dependent on technology. Yet at the same time I am deeply concerned about the dehumanising perils of '*too much of a good thing*'. Looking at Elon Musk's latest Neuralink explorations or Facebook's (Oculus) VR fake nirvana I often wonder whose job it will be to make sure that all this exponential technological progress remains humanly sustainable and yes, *healthy*.



Welcome to Big Tech Media Big State Big Health Big Green

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One thing is for sure: the explosive rise of platform capitalism and the

increasingly corrosive dominance of algorithmic media (aka 'social networks') must and will be tackled in 2021. Technology regulation will certainly be on top of the agenda for the next few years, everywhere, and wise (technology) leaders will embrace it. Side-note: Don't miss the brand-new 'Social Dilemma' film on Netflix, and read my previous Forbes post on '[The New Human Renaissance](#)'.

GREAT LEADERS WE CAN TRUST

The role of the state, and government in general has exploded during this crisis, and it has become clear that if we can't trust that our leaders and our government officials know what to do (and to actually *do the right thing*), emergency situations tend to get much worse, quickly. Strong, informed, clear-headed and science-based as well as compassionate leadership is now utterly essential, and it's probably not a coincidence that countries led by women such as New Zealand, Iceland, Taiwan, Finland, Germany and Switzerland have fared much better in dealing with this crisis. Faith in leaders is turning out to be crucial in flattening the infection curve, and reducing fatalities.

My personal bottom line is this: I am learning many good lessons during this crisis. I am questioning many outdated assumptions. I am rethinking my own narratives. I am adapting and practicing my pivots, and I am refocussing on what really matters.

Maybe the future is indeed 'better than we think'.