Climate change in the time of corona: That’s so 2019…

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**Social media extravaganza**

To stay productive these days I try not to spend too much time on social media…I’m failing miserably of course. On Twitter many people are worrying about the Coronavirus (COVID-19), blaming others for not doing enough to flatten the curve, or sharing videos of epic Zoom blunders. LinkedIn is used to praise our lackluster attempts to do online meetings and showcase corporate initiatives that ease some of the pain. On Facebook we fuel our friends with nostalgia, sharing memories of when we could still go outside. It is annoyingly sunny these days in the UK. And TikTok? TikTok shows us how to master new dance routines when in self-isolation. In our family, we are thinking about having a go at the arm-flinging [Renegade](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Th9f7_KxMf4) routine or perhaps the floating feet of the [Ride It](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvlTKQg5bHQ&t=73s) dance. We might need a long period of quarantine though for this to be successful…we have other talents!

**Why won’t you listen to us?**

But what has our community of sustainability scholars to add in times of crisis? We’re frustrated. And we vent this frustration on Twitter. Why do people listen now and take bold action while the same is oh so necessary for sustainability and climate change as well? The explanation is quite obvious. The coronavirus affects us now, it impacts people close to us, and it is a matter of life and death. Most sustainability events are more psychologically distant. The impacts will take place sometime into the future, what impacts will look like remains uncertain, and when they are more immediate, they tend to take place far away and affect others, not us. Clearly most of us will disagree with this analysis. People just don’t understand climate change well enough to realize that it’s already being disruptive to our society and environment.

**Us and them**

Still, many people also see the coronavirus as something that won’t affect them. The young and fit won’t suffer as much is a widely held idea. There are generational and societal fault lines here, pitting the young against the old; the rich against the poor; and the worried ones against those who just want to live their life to the max and party. Yet, these fault lines are not always the same as with climate change. While the young blame the old for causing climate change, the old now worry the young are not taking the coronavirus seriously. A fundamental difference is the much broader basis for support to take bold action on the coronavirus. While decision makers think twice before making any sacrifice to economic growth when they announce climate change measures, with corona they show no hesitation at all. Only in some [unnamed] countries there is still some debate about what is more harmful to the economy, the virus or the measures to stop it from escalating.

**Emotions or rational decision making?**

Bold measures might simply be an act of rational decision making, not taking action now will only lead to worse outcomes in a few weeks’ time. However, emotions also seem to play a role in the decision-making process. For many leaders the fear of going into the history books as being the ones that failed to issue a lockdown, and do what is necessary, clearly overrides worries about economic growth. But there is also the fear of losing the next elections. With corona, we’ll know soon enough if the measures were adequate. If not, our politicians will be held accountable. With climate change we keep groping in the dark about who we should blame. The media are pulling the wool over our eyes by reporting on so many alternative causes for extreme events, such as the recent fires in Australia and the Amazon and the floods in the UK, that we seem to forgive our politicians more easily.

**Will we rethink our economic system after the corona crisis?**

Will the coronavirus change how we think about climate change? I’m not so optimistic. There will be major impacts for specific sectors such as airlines, the market street, and the self-employed. Many businesses won’t survive. This might lead to a dip in carbon emissions but the voids they leave will be filled quite quickly by others. For most other sectors, I’m afraid that it will be a return to business as usual. The economic downturn might well be a reason to park climate change again as an issue we’ll deal with later. The last financial crisis showed us as much. Is it all doom and gloom then? Is there no silver lining? I do hope and expect that some of our new routines will stick. We now know that it is really not that difficult to reduce our business travel. We finally forced ourselves to explore the exciting world of online teaching and meetings. We have invested in the infrastructure and hopefully we will keep using it. Still, I’m not so sure that the coronavirus will turn out being the game changer for climate change that we might be hoping for. If social media shows us one thing then it is that trends are quite short-lived. Climate change now already sounds so 2019…