The background of the header is a photograph of Earth as seen from space, showing the curvature of the planet and city lights at night.

Post the current crisis, will we see the move to more sustainable living accelerate and evolve? And what does this mean for brands?

HELEN BRAIN - STRATEGY DIRECTOR & JOINT HEAD OF SOCIAL CHANGE HUB 14 APR 2020

BEHAVIOUR CHANGE BRANDS OPINION

Wow, 2020...

We're three months into a new decade. So far Australia has been on fire, the UK has flooded, [air pollution](#) has killed over a million people worldwide and now COVID-19 has been added to the pot.

Even before the corona pandemic, we were amid an enormous period of change – the third great transformation of society in our lifetime.

If the first transformation was globalisation – where we saw brands expand across the globe and the world's biggest names were the likes of McDonalds and Coke, and the second was digital and saw the rise of GAFA; then this current third-wave transformation is to a more sustainable, diverse and human-centred society.

The unprecedented changes in behaviour we are now seeing as a result of the corona pandemic may alter how and when this third transformation happens.

Which brands will adapt successfully?

“In a crisis the rules don’t apply – which makes you wonder why there are rules in the first place” Astra Taylor, Filmmaker and author.

Thanks to COVID, we know now that we *can* break the rules. Things we’ve been told are impossible, have been proven to be entirely doable.

It *is* possible to work flexibly around childcare, to change our consumption habits for the greater good, to reconnect with local community, for business to serve people as well as profit, and to come together as a mass of humanity to create change at speed.

When this is all over, we may be able to push a little of the genie back in the bottle, an arm or a leg maybe...but it’s unlikely we’re ever going to get the whole thing back in there.

This third wave of transformation is here to stay, and it is likely to speed up.

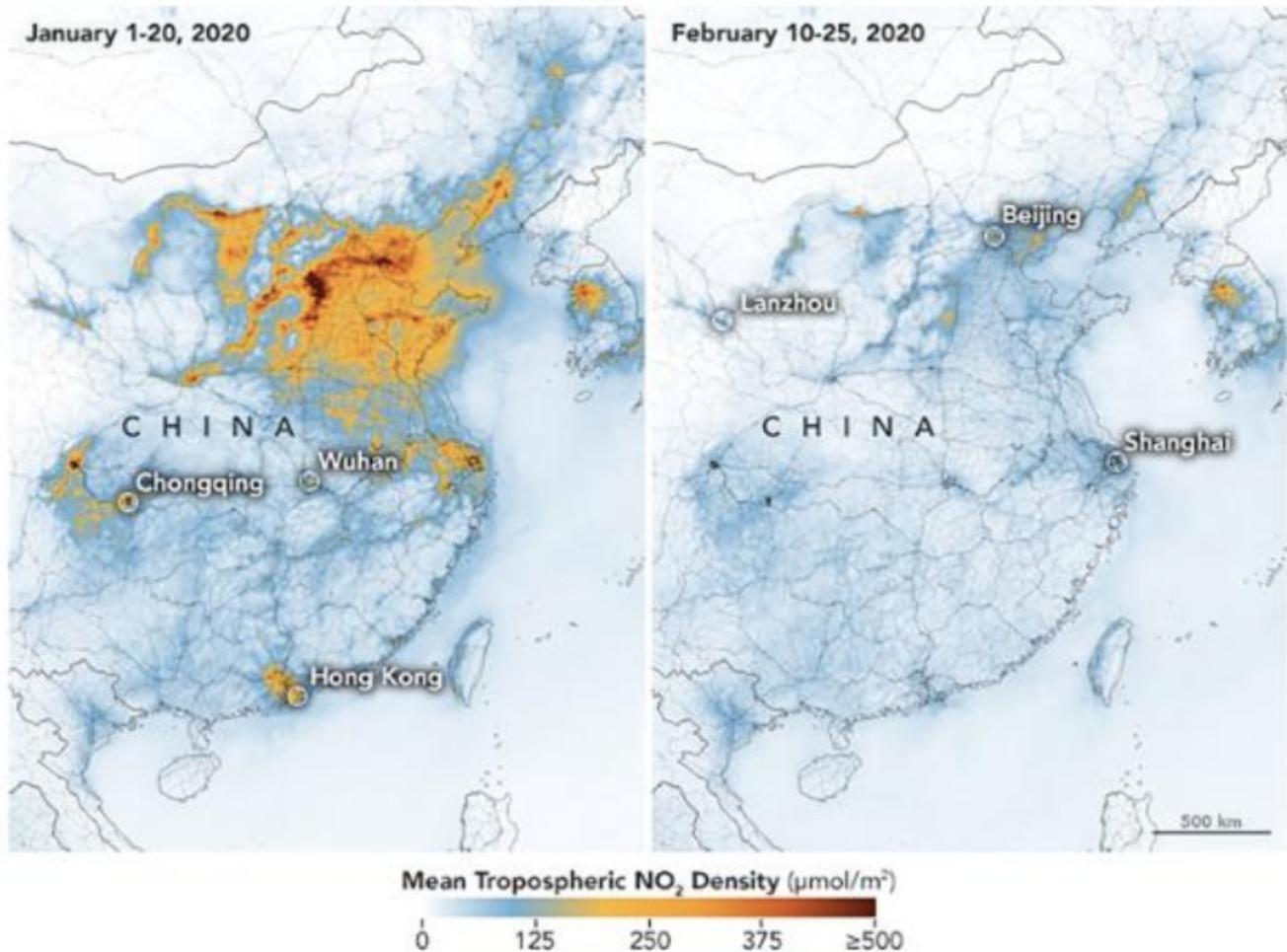
For decades now scientists, environmentalists, governments, business leaders and our children have been asking us to change our behaviour, our society and our economy to help save humanity. The changes required have not been happening at the scale or the pace required however because we told ourselves that they weren’t possible.

That argument doesn’t stand up anymore.

We’re currently slap bang in the middle of proving that when push comes to shove, we are highly capable of changing very quickly. Even if it means doing things differently or losing parts of our lifestyle we thought were ‘essential’.

There has been clean air over China’s cities over the past month for instance, as a result of

an almost total shutdown of the big sources of pollution, which has [saved twenty times](#) as many Chinese lives as Covid-19 has taken. (Air pollution kills about 1.1 million people in China every year.) People will remember this when the smog comes back and will want something done about it.



As with the climate crisis, COVID has also shown that individual actions; like reusing that coffee cup or washing your hands more often, alone will not cut it. Systemic change, organised, facilitated and even enforced by government and business, hand in hand with society, is required.

For many, there is hope that the mass shock-to-the-system we are currently experiencing will force us to reevaluate our behaviour and even accept restraints on our lifestyle in exchange for a healthier future.

However, there are counters to this.

1. COVID and the climate crisis pose very different psychological

challenges. Humans are good at reacting to immediate threats like a pandemic, but we are not hardwired to react quickly to long term challenges like the climate crisis.

2. Countries may invest heavily in stimulating the economy post-COVID, which may increase manufacturing, consumption and pollution as a result.

What does this mean for brands?

Whilst it is likely that much of society may eventually swing back to old behaviours, the demand from consumers for sustainable products and services will noticeably increase.

Plus, brands should expect that the narrative from scientists, environmentalists and the informed public will change to become more demanding, with a message of *“look what we can do when we work together and we’re forced to change – there are no excuses anymore”*.

Brands, therefore, need to plan against two fronts:

1. How to increase clarity and awareness of their current and future sustainability efforts.
2. How to adapt and invent products and services to meet an increased sustainability demand from citizens.

Tackling the above will be key for brands who want to thrive in our new future.

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