

Dorling, D. (2020) We need to quickly accept that this is an era of slowdown, not fast-paced change, The Telegraph, Business pages 4-5, April 3rd, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2020/04/03/world-already-slowng-long-lockdown/>

# We need to quickly accept that this is an era of slowdown, not fast-paced change

(online title: The world was already slowing down long before lockdown)

- **DANNY DORLING**

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Times Square in New York City this week

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I am far from being the first person to notice that many things are slowing down. The intriguing question is why are we so resistant to the idea of slowdown? Why is it that we much prefer the alternative stories of growth and acceleration?

Why, when political leaders such as Justin Trudeau make soundbite claims which are so obviously wrong, do we simply applaud their apparent wisdom without questioning the validity of their claim?

Here is the soundbite from his speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos on Jan 23 2018: "*Think about it: the pace of change has never been this fast, yet it will never be this slow again.*"

It was a silly thing to say in 2018, and it is even more evidently preposterous now. When I first heard those words, I was four years through writing a book called *Slowdown* and they stopped me in my tracks. I had been collecting data; huge amounts of data; the data we amass about ourselves, our lives and I had been using it to measure the pace of change – in just about everything. Had I Had I been looking at the wrong data?

Trudeau did not give any examples, so I searched out other people who claimed we were still living in a time of acceleration. I found a book about '*Social Acceleration*' which claimed that we were living in an ever more quickly accelerating world but was remarkably bereft of actual examples. One example given was that the apparent speed of talking in speeches given in the Norwegian parliament has increased by half compared with 1945. In the pages of my book *slowdown*, as I talk about finding huge amounts of evidence to the contrary, I sometimes wonder how long it took to find that solitary example of speeding up.

But what is slowing down you might ask? The answer is almost everything about our lives. We are usually still going forwards; but we are no longer accelerating in the way we once used to; and the slowing down seems set to continue for some time to come.

If you are interested in innovation you may have to go back over a century to find the most world changing discoveries, in new uses for electricity, the invention of the tractor or theories about the existence of germs which change what it means to be human.

If you are interested in invention then the 1930s and the discoveries made during the Second World War might have been the point of greatest acceleration – not the creation of the Internet, but the earlier computers.

If it is productivity, or the growth of GDP, that interests you most, then the 1950s will be your best decade.

If numbers of human beings on the planet interests you, then these rose the fastest in the 1960s and the fastest they ever will. We will almost certainly never touch 2% annual population growth ever again worldwide – we have not done so for more than fifty years now. Instead we have been slowing down.

In so many ways we began to change more slowly in the 1970s than the 1960s; more slowly in the 1980s than the 1970s, and slowing on and on. Today we are so used to stability that we are spooked witless by a pandemic that is likely to be smaller than that which occurred in 1968. What 1968 pandemic you might ask? And that is my point. So much was changing so quickly back then that the influenza that spread across the world that year (and returned again in again in 1969, 1970 and 1972) is now all but forgotten. Back then a million are thought to have died, including one hundred thousand in the US.

Why does slowdown matter? One reason is that when we have emerged from pandemics in the past, life has always very quickly returned to normal. In *Slowdown* I chart how the 1918 pandemic resulted in a 14% fall in global productivity, but that was quickly reversed to a rise of more than 16% in the following year because we were then in a time of acceleration. Even the most deadly and widespread of pandemics could hardly dent the trend going forward.

In contrast, today, almost everything was slowing down as 2020 began. The only things I found to be accelerating were the numbers of air flights (a tiny few of us were taking more each year); our overall carbon pollution (from everything other than flights); global temperatures; and finally an acceleration in the number of young people going to university worldwide. For a few months at least all of these four exceptions will themselves dramatically slow.

We are on the downward slope of a trend. In the last few hours of March 2020 it was announced that the shareholders of British banks would not be claiming billions of pounds of dividends following a '*sternly worded letter from the Bank of England*'. When you are slowing down, wealth can literally disappear (as the world's billionaires have just discovered).

Early this year the the Bank of England published an obscure working paper written by Paul Schmelzing and entitled 'Eight centuries of global real interest rates, R-G, and the "suprasecular" decline, 1311–2018.' It describes a much longer and far bigger slowdown than the one I have written about. Soon you will become tired of hearing about slowdown, because it is the new normal.

How long before we hear: "*The pace of change is slowing, and it will never be this fast again*"?

Danny Dorling is the author of *Slowdown: The End of the Great Acceleration*.

**Sources:**

<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/working-paper/2020/eight-centuries-of-global-real-interest-rates-r-g-and-the-suprasecular-decline-1311-2018>

And this very recent BBC News story: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-52114410>

***The graphic below shows GDP growth slowing down since 1950:***

