

MARKETING

## Why normality should never be an aspiration

May 28, 2020



*Have we ever been normal?*

By [Ana Andjelic](#)

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There are two groups of people right now.

The first group yearns for things to go back to normal. They seek the comfort of the known and the familiar, and are the ones who line up in Paris when McDonald's reopened.

The second group and the McKinsey consultants prepares for the new normal. Their new normal is a version of the old one but with better adaptability, greater nimbleness or some combination of 5Rs resolve, resilience, return, re-imagination and reform because **that is how consultants roll**.

Both groups assume that there is such a thing as "normal."

Normal is defined as "conforming to a standard; usual, typical, or expected." Normal is very close to the "norm," which refers to what is common or frequent. Related to them is "normative," which refers to a morally endorsed ideal.

It is easy to confuse normal with norm and normative.

For example, it is considered normal that U.S. hospitals run as corporations. This is actually a norm: a most common way of doing things right now.

Back at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, U.S. hospitals were run as charitable institutions, focused on health care and care for the poor. They were funded by donations by religious organizations and the wealthy.

Or, working long hours in physical offices was considered not only normal, but normative. It supported an economic operating model that prioritizes open office space in the name of cost cutting, not based on how humans work best.

When something is normative, it is aspirational. It is also ideological.

In his recent [essay](#), Venkatesh Rao writes, "If you work a 9-5 job, and contribute to a retirement plan, you help

simulate an industrial ideology."

There are more men called David and Steve than women and ethnic minorities **among the chief executives of Fortune 100 companies**.

City streets were "**designed by cars while we weren't looking**," until we were forced to move more slowly and enjoy quieter cities and fresher air.

Fashion shoots have been increasingly large, **costly** affairs that took a long time to produce. But then personalities from Marc Jacobs to **Robert Pattinson** to Naomi Campbell pulled photoshoots that simultaneously managed to come across as professional and intimate.

"Normal" is also a habit. It is the way that we as societies, economies and as individuals are used to doing things.

Our habits gave us a staggering income inequality, inaccessible healthcare and unsustainable growth. It also gave us the climate crisis and "disaster capitalism."

As Siddhartha Mukherjee writes in his April 27th *New Yorker* **essay**, "I fear that the resumption of normalcy would signal a failure to learn. We need to think not about resumption but about revision."

Here are at least four things that need revision:

Growth. GDP growth **does not enhance** life satisfaction, alleviate poverty or protect the environment. But we still seem to come short of a viable alternative to a financially stable non-growth economy. The closest we came were calls for "green growth."

The solution seems to be as normative as it is systemic: abandon GDP as a measure of economic progress and/or supplement it with additional indicators, such as carbon emissions, strength of the healthcare system and infrastructure, education, and life expectancy.

The growth imperative deformed industries as well, starting with global sourcing model and product-driven value chains. The lean and overextended supply chains worked great and yielded huge surpluses until they did not.

Alternatives are on-shoring production and increased self-sufficiency of companies in terms of their reliance on locally sourced materials and talent.

Human-centrism. Most of our institutions are built for, and around, individuals, with narratives and ideologies of individual freedom and competition to match.

But humans are not only individuals, they also belong to communities and are members of a society. Their behaviors are shaped by those around them and by collective symbols and stories.

The new social and economic targets are a community and a society, not an individual: "jobs to be done" not just on the level of an individual, but in terms of their social and economic network.

Short-time horizons. "**Hyperbolic discounting**" is a behavioral economics term that describes human tendency to overemphasize short-term risks and rewards versus long-term ones.

Psychologically, we are not primed to think in terms of abstract threats and long time horizons. Sociologically and economically, we can get used to it.

Design for re-use that has gained traction in apparel and fashion, interior design, transportation and industrial packaging forces a timeline where results are counted in decades and through secondary effects of our choices.

At the moment, all around us there are reminders of wide-reaching and long-lasting consequences of our actions for our environment and for our communities. We need more of these reminders.

Specialization. Product-driven value chains are crazy cost saving until they break. They are not designed for failure.

Most of our social and economic systems operate according to the same logic of industrial optimization. This logic requires splitting up production, creation and distribution into ever-more minutiae tasks that can be improved on repeat.

With this narrow focus, it is hard to consider the cascade of consequences of any single action be it in production, consumption, education or governance and how these actions connect producers with consumers, with the infrastructure, public policy and with the environment.

The culture of individualism and the economy of efficiency created the world of specialists.

OUR PERCEPTION of what is normal is a social and political process.

How different this perception will be once the immediate health crisis is over depends on what we pay attention to, and what and who we choose to ignore.



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