

Cafe Connect - Episode 6

Voice over [00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Dr Chris Croly [00:00:07] Thanks very much for joining us today. Ladies and gentlemen, you join us for the next episode of Cafe Connect. Cafe Connect, is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen by the Public Engagement with Research Unit here and in this podcast series we are really looking to meet different researchers who are going to talk about the research and talk about how it impacts on our everyday lives.

Dr Chris Croly [00:00:29] This series is something of a response to the current social distancing guidelines. And so normally at Cafe we would encourage people to ask questions of the speaker afterwards and we would really hope that you would like to do that as well. And we would encourage you after you listen to this, to e-mail any questions to PERU, that's PERU@abdn.ac.uk. I will read that out again at the end. Today I'm very happy to be joined by my colleague, Professor Donald Hislop. Donald is a personal chair in the Business School at University of Aberdeen. I think specifically the wonderful title for the professorial chair, Donald, is Sociology of Work and Technologies. Is that right?

Professor Donald Hislop [00:01:12] Yes, that's correct.

Dr Chris Croly [00:01:14] So really, what does this mean, what are the main areas that you research?

Professor Donald Hislop [00:01:20] My research interests and my background discipline is Sociology. So I've tried to look at technology from a sociological point of view. So that means how do people make sense of technology? How do people adapt and use technology? So, it's understanding the impacts of technology on people and the role that people play in designing it, using it, etc.. And if you look at technology like that, people have a very significant role and, users, designers, etc. have a very significant role in shaping technology, what it looks like and how it operates, etc..

Dr Chris Croly [00:02:02] Yeah, I mean, obviously technology as it is, is generated for people. Doesn't that mean we are the users, we are the creators but we often are sort of a last thought in a process from a designer?

Professor Donald Hislop [00:02:12] Yes, that's probably one of the big criticisms that designers don't adequately take account of users. They don't adequately communicate with users when they are designing things, that is a sort of afterthought often. So, yes, that's not done adequately.

Dr Chris Croly [00:02:31] I guess right now, with the current impact of Covid-19, with a huge upsurge in home working, this has become so relevant now to everybody. I mean, obviously technology has been increasing and encroaching into everyday life, I will say her name gently, but I think we have four or five Alexa round about the house controlling various aspects of our house, heating and lighting.

Professor Donald Hislop [00:02:57] In terms of specific technologies, my focus has evolved. I've really been looking at this topic for maybe 20 years. It seems a bit scary to think of it like that. But, over that time period I've looked at home working and teleworking, and mobile working, so business travel specifically. I had a research grant to look at business travel and how did people work when they travel. People sitting on trains with

laptops and working in railway stations etc.. And in the last couple of years, linking to your comment about Alexa, the last couple of years I've been looking at the impact of AI on work. But the topic of homeworking has become probably the most relevant of my research interest just in the last few months with lockdown and Covid.

Dr Chris Croly [00:03:51] Yes, you are right. We both work for the University of Aberdeen and I've been working from home for five months now. I guess it's the same for yourself.

Professor Donald Hislop [00:03:59] Yes, the nature of homeworking has changed significantly. This is one of the key things, that the research on home working or teleworking suggests that if you do it part time, maybe two days a week, three days a week, and you go into the office two days a week, that is the optimal balance because you can have some focussed time at home, you can work on things etc, but you also can go into the office, and socialise. Usually the research suggests if you're home working permanently, that is not so ideal because you don't have the interaction with colleagues. Isolation may be a problem and communication becomes difficult. So a lot of academics, me included, have been fortunate, my whole career I've worked at home some of the time. But typically two days a week or three days a week. So since March, it's been totally different. Permanent full-time home working with no opportunity to go to the office is a game changer for most people, that's not how most people have worked at all until now.

Dr Chris Croly [00:05:07] Absolutely, it would be fair to say that both my wife and I are in exactly the same boat. So my wife works for North East College, incidentally she is a business analyst, which I'm sure you could relate to. And, you know, we both suddenly find ourselves working from home, which was a totally alien concept and again so many people now find themselves in this boat. So this is one of the big changes and this is a change that it's been out there, but it's been kind of foisted upon us by the current situation by the arrival of Covid-19. What are the other ways in which work is changing and how is it going to change the immediate future?

Professor Donald Hislop [00:05:48] Increase in homeworking is probably the main one and closely related to that is a reduction in business travel. I think business travel will be much less likely. I think Covid and homeworking has made organisations question how much business travel people do. And that has been a question they've been thinking about for years because of carbon footprint and the cost of travel. But they haven't really addressed it perennially. Business travel usually says, we'd like to reduce travel, but you can't beat a face to face meeting, so 'I have to go to Australia, etc.'. Now, the debate has changed and people are now saying 'really, I don't need to go to Australia, I can just do it by Teams or Skype, etc.'. So, the debate on business travel has changed enormously and I think maybe people are more reluctant to get on planes and businesses are more aware that we don't need to travel so much. You know, you can have virtual meetings with many people. You can have a big group of people from different locations, all communicating and sharing documents and having face-to-face interaction. Okay, maybe people are not physically close together, but the quality of video technology these days means you can get a reasonable quality face-to-face interaction.

Dr Chris Croly [00:07:17] That's a completely fair point. And I think, when you mentioned Teams there even compared to five months ago, Teams has come on leaps and bounds as well.

Professor Donald Hislop [00:07:25] Yes, you can see a sort of technology war between all the different platforms, between Zoom, Teams and Skype. I think Teams has adapted

quite a lot because I think they've been catching up with Zoom. One of the features that Zoom had was they had a gallery so you could see people much more easily on Zoom. You could have a gallery view with twenty faces and Teams wasn't so good for that, but Teams as modified and now I think you can get a similar gallery view team so you can see 10 or 12 people in a Teams meeting. And just being able to see people face-to-face does seem to change communication.

Dr Chris Croly [00:08:11] Absolutely. And of course, you can share files, have live versions of Excel spreadsheets, Word documents, as well as the chat function. It comes together and I think we've all seen this. Covid-19 has taken something that was already there and then kind of accelerated the change, and in this next case, do think that would be fair?

Professor Donald Hislop [00:08:34] Absolutely I mean, in terms of homeworking in general, if you go by the debate on homeworking in America, they call it telecommuting, homeworking or teleworking, people have been talking about this since the 1970s when computers started to develop, and just like in the 1970s, there was the oil crisis and they were trying to reduce travel and the price of petrol was going up. One of the puzzles for people looking at home working is the adoption of home working, the widespread adoption of home working was never that significant, if you look pre Covid, maybe 20 percent of workers regularly work from home. The technology made it possible for many, many more workers to work from home, but organisations have always been reluctant to let it happen. Maybe it's a trust issue with giving workers autonomy to work from home. So, from a whole working point of view, it's been underdeveloped, really. Covid has forced companies to adopt it without choice. Like with Aberdeen University, suddenly they shut the campus and we all became home workers within two weeks. The Technology's been there, for probably at least 10 years the technology's been there. But companies have been reluctant to really properly engage with it.

Dr Chris Croly [00:10:06] You are right. There's an employer attitude there questioning if you're going to get this license to go and work from home, are people going to...

Professor Donald Hislop [00:10:15] Watch neighbours.

Dr Chris Croly [00:10:16] Absolutely. I'm not sure how long you can watch neighbours for but you know maybe some people have. But then there's also the employee attitude to it as well. Can we trust this technology, is this going to see us through? And now we've actually done it for these couple of months we can see as a whole, the broadband has held up, Wi-Fi has been good and this is 4G. Before we move to 5G.

Professor Donald Hislop [00:10:39] From an individual point of view, we are incredibly dependent on the technology. For the last few days I've been having problems with my broadband. And I almost asked you to reorganise. Because I actually I phoned up my broadband provider this morning and I actually got it sorted. I'm kind of looking at my router, so I've got the problem sorted. But for two days I felt really frustrated because I've been in meetings and the broadband hasn't worked and I've had to come out of meetings and rejoin. So home working is good when the technology works, but if you can't connect to your university server or if you can't connect to your Wi-Fi, you become incredibly challenged. Email is the default communication mode, email and video. And if we can't do that, it makes work problematic. So, individuals and companies are very dependent on the technology.

Dr Chris Croly [00:11:40] Yes, you are right. This has really highlighted this dependence that we have and how important these networks have become to us. I touched on 5G there. Is 5G something that will help with this moving forward? It's a different network altogether, isn't it? It's connected all across and is always broadcasting.

Professor Donald Hislop [00:12:02] To be honest, if you use excuse the pun, I'm not up to speed with 5G. But the people who advocate it say it is faster, it's better, etc.. You know, there is a degree of hype there. You know, the providers of the technology want to tell you that this is infinitely better. So I assume it is better, faster, and more reliable. Because customers, workers are making more and more demands. It's not just working at home. If you're in a family with three or four people in the house, you may have 10 devices connected to the Wi-Fi at the same time. You've got people working, and kids on laptops or on phone. You may have one person simultaneously using three devices. So broadband speed has had to really increase enormously just due to demand because of smartphones and tablets, etc. families are much more demanding of broadband.

Dr Chris Croly [00:13:12] Yes, that is a completely fair point. As I think about my house, I think we've got three boosters for the Wi-Fi around the house just to make sure that we're getting good signal everywhere.- That underlines neatly the point you're making about this reliance.

Professor Donald Hislop [00:13:28] I'm living on my own and right now I've got three separate devices connected to the Wi-Fi.

Dr Chris Croly [00:13:34] Yeah, that's just one person and the demands that they make, let alone, indeed. There is so much else that falls out from this as well. There's this reliance on the technology that in fact it needs to be there and it needs to work for us to be able to access the systems. But also there's health and safety within all of this as well. We moved to home working really, really quickly. And I think insurance is probably caught up with that as well. I guess if we are going to do this much, much more in the future, as you just said if it's maybe 50 percent in the office, 50 percent at home, which a lot of companies are seem to be making noises about now, then health and safety policies are going to have to be adapted. Is it the case that every single house is going to have a health and safety assessment, or is that just wildly idealistic?

Professor Donald Hislop [00:14:24] Theoretically, they should. If you want to be really strict about the health, then every employer should check out the facilities of every worker. When I started at Aberdeen, I got my office, I got my computer and somebody from I.T. came up and they were looking at my office ergonomically and they set up my desk and my screen height etc., and they were thinking about health and safety, and they gave me health and safety advice. Now that I am working at home all the time, I haven't had the same evaluation. I'm not trying to criticise my employer, the challenge of doing that is enormous. But most people are working at home without proper health and safety cheques. I'm sitting at a dining room table just now, sometimes I work in an armchair. Ergonomically, that's probably not the most ideal. But, one of the compromises and challenges is people's homes may not be ideal for homeworking. You know, some people may be having to work at a kitchen table or working in a spare bedroom or working sitting on their bed because they don't have an office space. And because we've had to rush into home working people have been forced into it. I'm a manager and a head of department, so I've had to check up on people's well-being and I have had various meetings with people. And I can tell just by looking at the background of their Team's video, people are working in their bedrooms and there are children about and

there are toys everywhere. These are not ideal work spaces and this is true for most people. Our work space at home is kind of compromised. We are making do really, but in the long term, employers should do some sort of health and safety check or maybe there's some sort of self-assessment checklist they can give people.

Dr Chris Croly [00:16:34] Yeah, I think that's the middle ground really, isn't it? The self-assessment. And I think to a certain extent, of course we've all been on Teams meetings and I've even seen people in the garden shed, bedrooms, and effectively cupboards. But this is the response to the current situation, we had been aware we would have to adapt to this as quickly as possible. You're right, the University has actually been incredibly supportive throughout this entire process. But it's still looking forward, isn't it? And then just what's going to happen there.

Professor Donald Hislop [00:17:09] In terms of seeing people in their homes, I am a sort of advocate of this. I actually think it humanises people more. The fact that we can see each other, or if kids walk into the room, or if you hear someone's spouse talking to them, or you can see furniture it makes people seem more human and it makes it more real. To some extent I have had more insight into people's lives because of this than I ever did when I was in the office.

Dr Chris Croly [00:17:48] Indeed, we all have different personas in different places, don't we, really? Yeah, you're right. Maybe people sitting at home feel more inclined to be the natural, slightly more relaxed self than they would be necessarily in different circumstances. Maybe they feel more inclined to vocalise what they want to say as well. I must say, just to go kind of slightly off, obviously we've all been thinking about home working and the good, the bad, and the bits in between. You know, I must say I've gained about an hour a day. I would walk to work normally and it is half an hour in to work and half an hour back. So that's great. You gain an hour a day, it's been lovely over summer, I've spent it in the garden and the garden has benefited from it. But then by another token, the lines blur. Actually the walk into work was really good, to gear yourself up and to gear yourself down at the end of the day. I'm not saying I don't check email outside of work hours, I'm very guilty of that, but there was more of a barrier.

Professor Donald Hislop [00:18:49] Travel to work, whether it's walking or getting on the bus or getting on a train, allowed people to do what's called a role transition. You would transition from home to work or from work to home and that buffer of time has traditionally been quite helpful. I know it's time you could save if you're not travelling, but if you've had a stressful day in the office and you're walking home that role transition and that time can allow you to decompress and think about switching off from work. So travel time, I'm not saying we should all go back to commuting, but the role transition that allowed you had its benefits and because we are now living and working in the same place, the boundary between work and non-work is incredibly blurred, especially if you're constantly checking your e-mail, if you have your e-mail on your smartphone, then for a lot of people, the boundaries become almost eliminated and that is not politically healthy. That puts a massive onus on us to manage that boundary and it can be difficult. If you've got e-mail on your phone and you're relaxing, watching Netflix and you hear an e-mail, your inclination may be to check it, so it puts a big demand on us to manage the boundaries.

Dr Chris Croly [00:20:22] So if you're not careful, you can slip in to being 'always on' effectively?

Professor Donald Hislop [00:20:26] Yes. You wake up in the morning and you check your e-mail, or the last thing at night you check your e-mail.

Dr Chris Croly [00:20:33] Yeah. So this is how we have to adapt moving forward. So we've talked about the immediate future. This is the changes that we see now. But, you mentioned, this has been about since 1970s. You mentioned the energy crisis and we've touched and transport here. Does this move to home working fit well with the idea that governments do want to encourage people to just commute less, use cars less, travel less? I mean, is this something that's coming together quite neatly because of this?

Professor Donald Hislop [00:21:06] Well the impact on travel or public transport is contradictory, I can see good and bad. I have to say, I am an avid walker and cyclist, so I look at this partly from a cycling point of view. There's been some positive things about reduced commuting time and government policy, encouraging people to walk or to cycle, to work. But, there is a possibility that public transport may be getting used less. The UK government effectively said that people can only travel by public transport if it is necessary and wear a mask, etc. So there's a possibility that when people start to really go back to the office, they may commute by car rather than get the train or the bus. So, you know, I think we're not quite at that stage yet. I think despite Boris' encouragement to get people back to the office, I think a lot of people are still working at home and I saw some research about London and talking about central London, and the central London economy is still really suffering because 30 - 40 percent of people are still working from home and don't go to the office. So all the train companies, the sandwich companies, the Costa coffees that used to provide all these businesses are really struggling. Public transport may be under pressure and people may be reluctant to go back onto crowded tubes etc., even if they're wearing masks, that may be seen as something difficult. So we may see an increase in car based commuting.

Dr Chris Croly [00:22:58] I take the point, you are effectively in your own safe bubble that you can control and I see really what you mean by that. The impact on the other economies, the sandwich shops and the spending power employees would have whilst they were in a central area. I can say from my own point of view that I've probably put more money in the way of Jeff Bezos than I have previously.

Professor Donald Hislop [00:23:26] Me too, EBay, Amazon...

Dr Chris Croly [00:23:33] I mean, lockdown in the 1980s would have been a very different thing to what it is now, with so much in the way of home deliveries for food and access to shopping online and getting delivered to your door the next day.

Professor Donald Hislop [00:23:48] Yes, you can see some companies that provide online services or that can deliver to the home have benefited during lockdown, and any organisations which require you to go to a particular place have suffered. Also streaming services like Netflix have done great. Amazon have done great. EBay has done great. Online shopping delivery has done great. The supermarkets have probably done okay. But cafes, restaurants, hairdressing shops, anything which requires you to go into a physical location has been really suffering.

Dr Chris Croly [00:24:32] Indeed. So we've been talking now for coming up for 25 minutes. Maybe just before we sign off, what's the much more longer-term picture? What's the thoughts on how work is going to change beyond what we can see just now?

Professor Donald Hislop [00:24:50] To be honest, I can give you the academic compromises, which is that it is too early to tell. But, I do think the homeworking trend and the reduced travel trend will probably continue to some extent. A lot of people have realised that working from home is actually good and they can do their jobs quite effectively from home. So even when people start going back to the office, I think the percentage of people who partially work at home will stay higher than it used to be. My best friend, lives in Banchory, which is 15 miles from Aberdeen, and he works for Shell. Since lockdown he has been working from home and he used to work in the big headquarters in Aberdeen. He is less willing to go back to the office now and I think there's been a realisation by Shell that maybe we don't need such a big office facility anymore. And lots of employers are now starting to think, maybe we don't need such big offices. So homeworking and reduced office space, touchdown desks or hot desking might be the norm, where you go in one day a week to the office and you don't have your own desk and you don't have your own office. That would be my prediction.

Dr Chris Croly [00:26:12] Fair enough. Well, Donald, this has been really interesting. Obviously, a very timely discussion as well, given the current circumstances. Thanks very much for giving us your time. As I say, we really hope that people will e-mail in with questions. So, if you've been inspired by this and you want ask Donald anything, please e-mail us at PERU@abdn.ac.uk. But in the meantime, Donald, thanks very much, and Ladies and Gentlemen, I hope to see you at the next Cafe Connect.

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