In a time of crisis, a global lockdown needs a digital unlocking

We are at a very special moment in history right now. Never before in modern times have we seen such a global impact and a global response to a crisis, which largely ignores geopolitical borders. The COVID-19 outbreak and its repercussions have put cities, countries, entire regions on hold. The news each day brings new stories of economic hardship, of fear, and grief, peppered with signs of hope – hope for a cure, for a vaccine, for ways to work and earn a living whilst facing lockdown, hope for the time after the Corona virus has lost its capacity for destruction.

One saving grace of this crisis is that the global digital infrastructure – the terrestrial and mobile networks, the data centers, the undersea cables and the satellite connections that support the global Internet – is by now well enough developed for people in most countries to stay in constant contact despite isolation.

Lockdown does not mean shut-down

This means that, today, lockdown does not necessarily need to mean shut-down.

Where possible, people are finding ways to make the best they can of the situation. Companies that have sent their workforce into home office, keeping their staff in employment and their operations running. Logistics are being maintained, and retailers have been quick to offer delivery services for those unable to leave their homes. Freelancers are seeking creative new ways to make ends meet using digital tools, and communities are looking for ways to support local initiatives.

Digital communication is vital to this. It enables people to stay in contact with loved-ones they can't meet with. It enables children and students of all ages to continue with their education. It helps doctors to – when appropriate – provide consultations and therapy via telemedicine to avoid unnecessary contact. Even the researchers who we all pin our hopes on finding a vaccine are using digital applications to remain in contact and share data in their efforts to understand the virus.

Digital applications are key to enduring the crisis

So digital applications that enable communication and collaboration are key to enduring the current crisis. Globally, we now see a very high demand for digital applications, and these are becoming crucial for enabling business and private life to function, not only in times of crisis. But even the best application cannot perform if the underlying digital infrastructure is not as solid, resilient, and secure as possible.

Of course, this is even more critical in the current situation, but it also highlights the general trend that, as our economy becomes more global, as our planet becomes home to more and more people, and as more regions need to be enabled in terms of communication, the only answer can be digitalization. Because otherwise it won't scale, and therefore won't work in the long run.

Digitalization – and therefore reliable digital infrastructure – is the only answer

Therefore, one answer to some of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic – and the modern world in general – is sophisticated digital infrastructure, because this allows the use of smart digital applications and solutions which will make people's lives better. In a globalized world, economic growth and the development of societies in most regions is now based on digital communication and digital services, and these in turn depend on the underlying digital infrastructure.

As a result, the interconnection community – more than ever before – must deliver continuous and high-performance connectivity: everywhere, for everybody, and for everything. This community, and the infrastructure that they build and care for, is just as critical as other critical services in a crisis. It is essential that this digital infrastructure is as global, open (neutral), resilient, scalable and secure as possible, in order to deliver the many and varied services needed by people, institutions, and businesses.

As an element of this crucial digital infrastructure, Internet Exchange Points like DE-CIX are key to improving the quality of performance of digital applications and digital communication – for businesses, for medical facilities, for education, recreation/entertainment and for news and media outlets – for all users, wherever they are. Interconnection services need to allow communication to occur along the shortest route and in the most secure way.

Digital communication on the rise

These times of global lockdown are having a strong impact on how we interact with each other and how we behave, how we work and how we communicate with each other. As a global operator, DE-CIX's Internet Exchanges on four continents are all recording the same trend: Internet traffic is growing, together with demand for quality. While different regions are at different stages of development, depending on when the COVID-19 infections began to take off in their locality, the trend is valid from North America to Europe, to the Middle East, and on to the Indian sub-continent.

Three types of Internet traffic in particular have risen substantially: traffic from collaborative communication tools has doubled since the crisis began, as has traffic from streaming services. This is significant of both enterprises and the education sector migrating their activities online. Added to this, we see around a 50% increase in traffic from online gaming. Everywhere, we see a similar demand for reliable digital infrastructure.

Communication behavior will significantly change in the long term

Even before the current crisis, we were seeing huge investments in new streaming services. But what's happening now, in response to lockdowns around the world, will change the game in many areas of activity. The current transformation of attitudes, processes and systems will continue to echo through the post-Corona era. People are taking the time to keep in touch with their loved-ones on a more regular basis. To value the time they have together, despite the distance.

Many employers are looking into how remote working benefits business continuity and supports their employees to master challenges. But beyond this, decision makers are also beginning to recognize the long-term benefits of a more profound digital transformation. Companies are taking a long, hard look at how they manage their offices, how staff interact, how teams collaborate, what business travel is actually essential, whether meetings can be reconceived to be more productive. They are becoming aware of how the move online can unlock the potential to save money and increase revenues.

This won't only have an effect in the short-term – it will be a game changer for business and private communication behavior, and is likely to lead to even higher usage of digital applications than we would have forecast in the pre-COVID-19 world. This is not to suggest that now everything will be digital only. Rather, that we need to recognize that we have options: processes should be reviewed, and we should learn from the times of crisis how to make our life better in general.

While the virus itself currently remains a serious threat, we are all doing what we can towards minimizing its impact, stopping its spread, flattening the curve, and finding a cure. But this crisis can also offer us a chance to re-evaluate, to see things differently. Right now, we are being forced to do that. Let's also take the time

to learn to manage tasks more efficiently, operate more prosperously, discover successful modes of behavior in terms of business and private communication, which we can apply now and in the future.

Meaningful investment decisions should be made in the future

We have to learn out of this so we can make meaningful investment decisions in the future. Digital infrastructure is the enabler of this long-term transformation, and it helps to ease the pain of today's lockdown. The Corona crisis throws into stark relief the regions that have solid, reliable digital infrastructure, and those regions of the globe that remain underserved. The digital divide must be eliminated so that all communities can in future have access to information, access to digital communication tools, and access to digital content. The Internet industry must take as their mandate the goal of a minimum level of digital infrastructure everywhere.

Nothing will be the same after COVID-19. Not for humankind itself, not for how we do business or how we (inter)connect in this new decade. This century, like last century, is presenting us with global challenges. However, these challenges – though of a different nature – can also be transformed by people and businesses. The current global crisis will change our life going forward, and to survive in the present and prepare for the post-Corona future, this global lockdown needs a full digital unlocking.