

Policy Brief

Touch Post-Covid19: Navigating through deafblindness in the UK via haptic-audiovisual technologies of perception.

Dr Azadeh Emadi and Dr Mitchell Miller (University of Glasgow)

KEY INFO

Research questions:

- In a post-Covid19 world, how will deafblind perception, particularly in relation to the sense of touch, be impacted by changes in social norms and physical spaces?
- What can deafblind experiences teach us about the emerging post-Covid19 world, and how can these alternative modes of perception inform the shaping of the new society to be more inclusive and interconnected?
- How can technologies of perception be utilised or developed to assist and enhance alternative perceptions while aiding inclusion and interconnectivity?

Policy area or themes:

- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- Guidance, Messaging and Behaviour Change
- Places and Communities
- Arts & Health and Wellbeing

Methods:

Qualitative study that adapts reflexive-ethnography while grounded in a practice-as-research approach. Research participants represent various levels of impairment and different ages and genders. Data gathered in three stages every four months over one year via: 1) audio diary; 2) interviews using open-ended questions; 3) research workshops: building on the audio diaries and interviews to explore the emerging concepts and ideas with selected participants.

Geographical area: UK-wide

Research stage: In progress, near completion

Summary of the research

Deafblindness, a complex condition of dual sensory impairment or loss, affects 0.2% of the global population (The World Federation of The Deafblind 2019). In the UK, nearly 400,000 people are affected, and the number is expected to increase beyond 600,000 by 2030 (The World Federation of the Deafblind 2019). This research looked into the experiences of the deafblind community in Scotland and across the UK during Covid19. Deafblind individuals, who rely on haptic experiences to navigate the world more than other social groups, are most affected by the changes in the social norms caused by the pandemic. Yet, their experiences aren't at the forefront of the current reshaping of and decision makings in our society. With the imposed social distancing and wariness towards touch, the deafblind community has become more isolated and experiencing forms of seclusion. To obtain a qualitative understanding of the communities' experiences during the pandemic, in collaboration with Deafblind UK and Deafblind Scotland,



we gathered audio-visual documentation of social experiences of selected members in the forms of interviews and audio diaries over 12 months. Collected audio-visuals has helped us to better understand their and our new world, and to propose the following policy recommendations:

Policy recommendations

1. Spatial intervention: Changes in deafblind people environment can disorient them significantly. To navigate space, deafblind people have to rely on spatial memory by constructing a mental map through sensing tactile qualities of space while walking, mainly via their feet and cane. To ease navigating obstacles and prevent negative impacts associated with ongoing changes to the city spaces due to COVID, the local councils can regulate the expansion of hospitality to outdoor spaces by placing boundaries to their extension. The Council could inform the community of any change via related organisations like Deafblind Scotland and Deafblind UK. We would also suggest that the needs of Deafblind residents should be an integral factor in the work of Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) and the development of Locality Plans (Scotland) and the implementation of the new UK National Planning Policy Framework. Also, [the 20 Minutes Neighbourhood](#) project can be an excellent opportunity to design and implement tactile mapping in city pavements. Implementing textured lines can ease deafblind movement and indicate any fixed obstacles (e.g. lamppost). Additionally, it can signal the presence of a deafblind individual to sighted pedestrians to open the way and include them in their space, particularly in busy sites.
2. Tactile and technological intervention: While Covid19 is moving societies toward more contactless technologies, it is essential to include or incorporate alternative haptic means for those with audio-visual impairments. The Council for Science and Technology can invest in incorporating vibration as a form of tactility to the existing screen-based technologies and digital environments. Our research develops a haptic tool that uses vibration to communicate spatial cues (i.e. distance, direction) to deafblind participants. We found vibration is an important and effective technique to communicate with deafblind people, which can be developed as a form of a digital braille code and implemented into digital technologies. Any future re-evaluation or updates to UK Accessibility Planning Policy and related guidance should take this into account.
3. Media representation and social awareness: To address the lack of awareness and accurate representation of deafblind people in media, we recommend educating and supporting young deafblind artists to showcase their works alongside sighted and hearing people. Organisations such as Arts Council England and Creative Scotland could facilitate collaborations between the community (e.g. deafblind UK, Deafblind Scotland) and art and/or educational (e.g. museums and universities) and media (e.g. BBC) organisations to develop works that are based on the deafblind vision of the world.

Key findings

Emergency measures introduced during crises often have a tendency to change social norms and reshape human behaviour. Current social distancing and isolation measures are no exception and have been significantly impacting deafblind people. For a more inclusive and interconnected society, it is vital to understand deafblind experiences and bring their voice to the forefront of decision-making processes:

1. Our research participants expressed great concern about the constant changes to their urban environment due to COVID19. Imposed social distancing, which encouraged the hospitality sector to expand boundaries to the outside space, proved a significant hurdle to deafblind individuals' spatial orientation and their independence to move around in the city. One participant expresses a moment of great anxiety to the point of crying because constantly overcoming unexpected obstacles in her own familiar street. The challenge of continually navigating a changing space pushed our participants into further isolation, as they preferred to avoid experiencing emotional distress.



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2. Due to the health crisis and technology becoming more contactless, deafblind people feel more excluded. Our participants acknowledge and appreciate the importance of technology, but it has been limiting their communication. Symptoms of Covid itself can also amplify this sense of exclusion and isolation, especially due to the loss of important compensatory senses (i.e smell). A number of our respondents have mentioned increased anxiety over both the risk of touch in the context of the pandemic, but also over losing the capacity to interact through touch.
3. Given the small deafblind population, there is a significant lack of the community representation and social awareness related to their experiences, particularly in the media. Our participants have often talked about society's lack of understanding of their lives and potentials leading to their social isolation.

Further information

More information on the research: <https://touch-post-covid.gla.ac.uk/index.php/open-data/>

The research data can be accessed: <https://touch-post-covid.gla.ac.uk/index.php/open-data/>

Contact details

Dr Azadeh Emadi: Azadeh.emadi@glasgow.ac.uk

Dr Mitchell Miller: Mitchell.Miller@glasgow.ac.uk

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