

Podcast series: 'In Conversation: Energy Research at Oxford'

Episode: 'Why do we fly & could we fly less? The Flying Less movement in the Higher Education Sector'

Transcript

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

Welcome to the Flying Less Podcast, a podcast created for the School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford. In collaboration with the University of Oxford Environmental Sustainability Team funded by the Green Travel Funds, the flying less. Podcast The podcast which asks what you and your university stand to gain by flying less.

Speaker 3

You know, I don't say that I will never fly again. I haven't flipped loans since 2007. You know there might be an occasion, but there has to be a really really high bar.

Speaker 2

If the aviation industry wants to be neutral, one way is to reduce the flight annually by 2 1/2%.

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

We're all happy to point out the problem, but actually finding the solution is far more difficult. A1 size fits all solution.

Speaker

Even if an institutional. Level isn't gonna work.

Speaker 5

But we definitely I would say that by not flying I really opened space for creativity for new ideas. I think very relevant ideas and for new ways of doing research.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

I'm your host and humanities turned social science researcher. Dr Nora Birksted green. Welcome back to the flying less podcasts. This episode is the 2nd flying less profile in this series where I find out what it takes to thrive as a flying less academic. I speak to Professor Hannah Knox, an anthropologist at UCL about her experiment with flying less. And its implications in terms of her discipline and care.

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

Hi, my name is Hannah Knox I am. I'm an anthropologist. I work at University College London and Uhm yeah I. I guess I've been invited onto the podcast, so talk about my experiences around the not flying in in academic work by ID.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

Yeah, I was wondering if we could start actually by not glossing over the the first bit that can sometimes be a bit uncomfortable, but to talk about actually how useful flying was for you for most of your academic career. Yeah, yeah yeah. Why why you? When and why you use planes and if there was an institutional expectation to fly in order to be a good academic?

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

So I finished my PhD in around 2003. I'd done research in the UK, so it wasn't that my research required flying particular. But certainly right from the beginning of having an academic career, I guess. One of the. Attractions of academic work is being able to be part of an international community of scholars to be in anthropology. The whole discipline is structured around thinking comparatively, so being able to. Talk to people who've done research in other parts of the world who are from other parts of the world, and obviously to do that effectively requires that you move in. You travel and you go and you and you spend time in other place. This is whether for research or for for, you know, for conferencing or networking or talking to people. So, so I think you know that that was definitely an attraction to what it means to be an academic. I mean, I, I remember speaking to someone may about. 10 years ago. Who isn't an academic who I know through? I threw my. Children she was helping the cup to the. Children and she had called you and your husband. You're so lucky goes to so many places you're always travelling and like it. Also made me kind of feel that you know, really aware of the privilege as well to being able to be mobile and to travel and to have all those experiences and not to have to pay for it yourself. Directly that it's part of your your job. So so so, so travelling that respect this you know very positive thing and then also immediately after doing. In my doctoral research I, a couple of beers after that I then did. A research project. Based in Latin. America, and obviously you know the the ability to be able to travel to another continent and and spend time there and to fly. There was completely caught up being able to. Do that project, but again, I think also being in that you know in another. Uh, in another continent in another space, again meeting people who aren't in a position to travel was also something I was very aware of at the time. So again, I think the the relationship between kind. The the privilege and the possibilities that that are kind of entangled with international travellers is is something that is maybe part of why it's quite hard to then not do that.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

Definitely yeah. So take some work to think through critically and reflect on that. So you've written the two blogs from 2018-2019. They're really great for explaining your thinking process, but obviously great to ask you to sort of, say, say something that out loud now. So yeah, maybe if you could just talk about some of the key moments that did make you think OK, this is brilliant. I love doing this and there's loads of benefits. From this, but actually, why might I start to think about cutting back on this?

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

Yeah, I mean so probably the most important thing it to kind of note is that from 2010 2011 my research itself started to focus on climate change. So I began a project that was looking at how climate models and date scientific data. On climate change. Was being incorporated into work to try to think about the future of of cities, and in my case the City of Manchester, which is where I was. Doing my research. So I was doing a lot of ethnographic research with policymakers and activists and engineers, really trying to understand the the. What you know why it was that climate change had become a kind of concern for them. Is also therefore becoming very kind of engaged with the current science on climate change. Very concerned shocked. I would say about like the realisation of

you know what was really a consensus within the scientific community about the implications of rising carbon emissions. And also this constant sense of cognitive dissonance I think was.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

Yeah, snap.

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

So maybe the best way of putting it where in. In in, in that. Kind of. Scientific kind of conversation or conversation between people who were really engaged with data around climate change. There was huge concern, but it was also kind of almost absent. This was pre the pre. The school strikes pre the Extinction Rebellion protests. You know, and and some of the kind of extreme events that we've seen weather events and stuff. That we've seen over the last few. And so in the public domain and newspapers in most policy and anthropology, think the cut that this really was not much of a conversation about carbon emissions. About the where those come from about the effects that they're going to have, you know that they're going to have, and I also. Began to meet more and more people. Trying to live their lives in kind of low carbon ways, they were thinking critically about their role within society. They were also not flying and at that time I was flying quite a lot and so I. Think it was. That that tension between. This realisation but you know, whilst there's there's all kinds of complicated things about kind of individual carbon footprints, but the realisation that the way that we were all we're all living our lives is massively destructive and and feeling like I was kind of in living in bad faith every time I got. On a plane. And and wanting to kind of confront it, but I found myself coming to a point where I. Felt like I needed to confirm that.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

You made the point about seeing other people in AXA and liver liver. Which sounds like that had an influence as well. Yeah, yeah. I mean what? What was the moment where you said oh, you know the pieces all added up? Was it just sort of calmly over coffee? It was a. Big light bulb. Moment what was the thing that actually meant? You know, I'm actually going to do this.

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

I think I'd been thinking about mulling over for a couple of years before kind of making that decision. I think the moment came of actually kind of like really deciding I want to kind of make a public statement about this. And when I went to, uh, I was flying to Warsaw to a workshop was on materialising the political, I think was the topic. It was very much about the kind of intersections between material practises and kind of politics and and I'd kind of taken 2 flights to get their free flight flew by. Frankfurt and I was coming back and I was sitting in Frankfurt Airport and I was just feeling you know, just feeling like. Like it, it was a bit ridiculous having these academic conversations. I've been presenting some of my work that I've been doing on climate change.

Speaker 5

Right?

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

And yet, nothing else that have in terms of the infrastructure of my own life and that I was participating in was changing. And I think I had. I'd already thought, well, I previously that I tried not to kind of initiate things. That would be that would be in in terms of, you know, choosing. To go to conferences and things that would involve a lot of flying. But I was still. Kind of responding to

invitations, but meant. But actually, the amount of flying I was doing wasn't really reducing, and I also had some personal things about the choices that I was making with my family about where. I've got holidays. Maybe it was my. Wedding anniversary, my husband said let's go to Rome for like a few days there was but you know and and and it and it. And it felt really complicated to to not do those things on the sort of ad hoc basis. So I just so you know, I spoke to my family. About this too and I and I just said right. I just I just want to see what it's. Like to to? Just not fly for a while and see what the implications are, because the feeling is like it would be. Really, really disruptive. There'd be a lot of loss, a lot of things that that one wouldn't have that you're used to having, so that's when. So I was sitting in Frankfurt Airport and I thought I'm going to like make a public statement about this rather than just trying to trying to kind of like quietly do things that's totally not working. So that's when I wrote a blog post and posted it. But saying OK, I'm not going to fly for another 2 1/2 years and and and we're going to. I'm going to see what the.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

Implications of that are yeah wow, so it's kind of like you were. Sort of psyching yourself up for it. And sorted by doing a public statement, you were almost sort of outmanoeuvring yourself and going. This is kind of terrifying. And it's hard to know exactly what the consequences are, but if I put it out there and go for it, I will find out.

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

Yeah, I think so. I think in summer I think I had just been through every single kind of thought process about why, you know, super reflexively. About you know why it didn't even matter. You know why on an individual level it didn't really matter, like it was only a drop in the ocean, but the really we need to be tackling the structure of the fossil fuel industry and not like focusing on our individual consumption, but I. Kind of rehearsal of these kinds of things. I thought about the role of the, you know, the importance of meeting and communicating with people in difficult life, but I think I just got to the stage of realising. But I still didn't even even with that I still didn't feel that it was right to or it still felt uncomfortable. So I thought. Well, yeah, now feels the right time to do something about it.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

Did the role of having others who had stopped flying in in he said it had influenced you.

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

Definitely. I mean, I think. First of all it if you are in contact with or in touch with other people who've made that decision to, to or kind of have an ongoing decision not to fly, then every time you do it, every time you fly, then it makes you reflect on that. Different, so I think that's you know, but I think that's important. It's not to say that it determines the choice not to fly. Obviously like it, you know, like it's more complicated than that. So in one respect I think. It's about being that that being in contact with people who weren't flying just made me be much more reflexive about why I was flying about whether it was necessary or not about what the benefits are about what the drawbacks were and. And that's because I, I think I shared with them. Those people I was having these conversations with a sense of the same concern over over climate change. Basically so you know, if you share that same concern, are you doing something different? Why is that? And in it's A and it's that you're doing. The right thing you're doing the right thing for yourself. And then the other thing is that I also kind of had, was, uh, increasingly aware of certain other academics who had also decided not to fly. And seeing that it was both well, seeing that it was possible not to

do that. And also I think I felt like. I would say aware of my own. Kind of position, so I at the stage that I was deciding not to make this statement. I was really aware I had a permanent position within a university department. You know lots of people. If I. Was in a more. Precarious position trying to establish myself within a field be visible. All those kinds of things, I think it would, that would have been much harder. There's all kinds. Of reasons where it could have been. Much harder. But that so that also made me feel working. Maybe there's a responsibility as well to like. Well, if I if I can do it. Whatever I try to. So and and yeah. And as I say, I think I always saw it. Sorry as a as a bit of an experiment as well. Just to you know to rather than rather than a kind of closed decision where I, I just know the answer and like like. So yeah, it's very much a very much a kind of way of way of questioning things. Maybe it was a bit of a research project.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

Yeah, exactly. But actually I did, that's great, so I won't source about that. So I mean you said you're gonna do for two years. Obviously you haven't predicted a global pandemic, but you have completed over a year. When it happens then and then and then we can. That's ongoing, but flying has become possible again, so can you give us an update how you're feeling about? It now at the.

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

Moment I don't have any immediate plans to fly anywhere. I have a visit to Denmark, planned in January and I'll be going over land, hopefully as but you? Know I'm also. Aware that if. You know restrictions come back in and it's really difficult to travel through different countries that might not be possible, so I'm kind of, you know, not not like militant about the idea of not flying, but it's now just seems to become like the default is to look for an option that doesn't involve. Planted within Europe, I think it's harder in terms of now. About kind of intercontinental travel, I expect at some point I'll go to the states. Or do you know and and and we'll fly there, but the default now feels like not flying and then the exception is flying rather than and and I think I'll find it I'll find. It there had to be a really good.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

Yeah, definitely. Now thinking through whether it's commensurate with the sort of the climate course, but not saying you'll never fly something near 0 or flying less or something like that rather than float free necessarily.

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, and you know, of course there were like circumstances. You know around. Yeah there are. There are certain there are circumstances where it's going to be the balance tips I'm sure, but I haven't come up. I I haven't that hasn't happened yet and then in. A way I. Think that it's it's always easier now because everybody is so you know conferences have hybrid options that wasn't really the case. When I tried to participate in some international conferences in a in a hybrid kind of way, and that wasn't really possible, and I think. The infrastructures are. There now to do that, so it's actually easier. To do that, but obviously, but I also. I also think it's important so that I don't really like when I think about not flying. I don't think about not travelling, so I don't. I still really value. You know, travelling, being with people, one of the things that's happened with. I think online teaching, online conferencing, online communications we've all got like super busy and there's just like 2. More and more and. More kind of. Interactive is already. It's all kind of really a kind of moment of information exchange. It's all really quick. Everything gets squeezed in. One of the. Nice things about getting a train somewhere is it takes. You know it might take 24 hours to get. There but then and

then you spend, like maybe three or four days there, rather than flying and spending a day. It actually stretches. Out at time it creates a bit more space for for thinking, for writing, for doing things, so so still like. Very much an advocate for for travel and for for being in places, being in place and spending time with people not just thinking. Oh not flying means means just transferring everything online.

Speaker

There hasn't been.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

A follow up, but you're saying you would in the second block, I think you would have a follow up blog, but am I right in? Thinking that hasn't been that yet.

Speaker

No, I haven't.

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

I haven't done that yet. As you say, I think every golfer everything got so so thrown up in the air by cave it. It sort of it. Sort of. Everything looks very different post code. I mean, it feels to me like the conversation about online conferencing has moved on a lot and there's much more openness to that, and certainly the idea of hybrid conferences is very, you know. I think people are really like. Super like kind of OK with that now and I'm sure that will continue in. Some form I don't. Think it will. Uh, face to face interaction. I think we really desire that, and I think it's really important as well as a way of kind of building academic communities could. It could. It could raise questions about who that face to face interaction is with, but then you know both in terms of inviting new people into. Spaces or being invited into different kinds of spaces. Because you're doing it online. Interesting conversations I'm having with people at the moment about the possibilities of. Live translation, for example, so that you can actually have conversations across different language communities, and that's much easier. You know there's a you know that could be much easier when it's mediated by a digital platform than if you were actually in a room together where you had to get microphone, headphones and microphones. And like a setup like that. So there are some possibilities, but but in terms of the more general conversation about flying, I don't. I don't know, I mean. Again, I expect to come. It will come back. To infrastructure, I think that people. Are aware of it, but it's just really hard. Like it's. Yeah, I think everyone is making these very complex decisions all the time, which are a matter of their personal circumstances. The amount of time they have who their colleagues are, who their friends are, where they. Work, what their research is, and. What what access to resources they have, where they are in their career and you could. It's just very it. It's very complex. It's not like it's a rational decision where someone is going to say, oh, this is what I, this is the moral, morally right thing to do and that's what I'm going. To do UM, but. There are changes which I think will. Make things easy. So in the European context and Europe is always been an easier place to do. Not flying than some other parts of the world. I mean, there's an academic anyway. There's you know there's investment now. There's there's all kinds of plans for sleeper services on trains that are going to be. You know, that might start between different European countries and those have been a direct response to an increased demand in people wanting to not travel by plane, which is partly to do with climate change. But I also think it's partly to do with the experience of flying not actually being a very nice experience. Either so you know people wanted to avoid that, and maybe you know it depends how long these restrictions go. Continue with with code, but your people are flying with masks like.

You know there's lots of those things which which may. People practise towards other forms of transport.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

If you could say about the major gain from flying less or or having a flight free, in fact period, and then you you had promised in your 2019 blog that you're going to some point, mention the challenges, so maybe it's a you know what? What were perhaps one one of the biggest challenges?

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

I thought it would be more challenging than it has been. I don't know whether that's to do with COVID. And the fact that you know no one has been travelling anywhere for the last year, and maybe without that by now, I would have been feeling like OK. I'm kind of missing out on stuff and I've got to change what I'm doing. It's probably changed some of the UM. Geography of where my engagement has been with people, UM. I my I have been quite a few times too. To Denmark and Scandinavia, and and that that I think, sort of bit, maybe that's because that's I don't know how much that I've had. A very supportive. Group of kind of colleagues there who were really kind of enthusiastic and and about. Uhm, about supporting kind of go. You know going by train but also doing things there in a different kind of way. And I think that really helped and so you know it's had. That's an unforeseen kind of benefit, but I hadn't really anticipated before. I I was feeling before COVID that maybe some of the kind of links with. With academic departments or academics in or academic conversations in North America were maybe not going to be as strong as a result of not going to some of the kind of conferences over there. But again, I think because of COVID-19. That's not necessarily. Being the case and then you know one of the things that we did that I did this year within my department was we had a. We ran a seminar series which, like everybody it was, run online. On soon but. It was really nice because it actually meant we could invite people we would never have thought of inviting them to to talk at it, and so we had. Someone who works in Australia and we had. Another colleague who's based in a university in the United States who? It's been doing work in Garner and we had, so we actually had an incredibly international audience and and I think, you know, I felt like that was a bit it actually so. So maybe so I feel like it's changed the IT changes the geography of the networks, but it doesn't necessarily make it better or worse, it just it has just changed.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

Could anthropology, you know? Is there a flight free anthropology or flying less anthropology? So feel free to answer that, but I did what I really want to ask because it's just such. A fascinating phrase that you talk about in one of the blogs is sort of a high carbon version of knowing. And I think you know that's where it gets really fascinating. 'cause obviously so much of this is practical and about physical climate science. But beyond it, obviously there there is this conversation about how we know and our relationship to each other and to society and and all of that. I was wondering if you could just maybe unpack that a little bit.

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

The point about high carbon or low carbon way of knowing was really trying to. Reflect on. I guess my own research interests, which are which is really a lot has been kind of very concerned with the. The way that. Forms of perceiving and understanding and imagining the world that we live in are entangled with the tools and technologies and infrastructures that make that knowledge possible. So something I've like. Been thinking about in, you know, intellectually my own work in in relation to

things that nothing to do with climate change, Even so previously. I've looked to kind of digital technologies and how they and changing ideas about work, or I've looked at roads as a way of kind of state making and thinking about the form of the road and as a kind of connective technology that is being central to the making. Of the idea of a. Coherent nation state so and and so it was the kind of obvious step for me in a way to say OK if we're going to change the OR if there's going to be some kind of shift in the infrastructures of academic knowledge, circulation or knowledge production, then what can that tell us both about the? Effects that flying had on the way that we have produced knowledge as academics, and what might, how might that change. And again, I don't think it's like a deterministic argument because. You know, obviously these things are very complex and there's like all kinds of feedbacks between the way that we think and the kinds of kind of way that we move as well. So, but there is, you know they're there, it did. Draw me to some. Literature there's, uh, I read a book which I think called Empire. Of the air or empire in the air, which is about kind of the the relationship between. In air travel and academia, it's really interesting to read that thinking about the the kind of racialization and class dimensions of air travel and who gets to travel and who works on the plane, and he services that and thinking about our own work in a bit more of a kind of structural, political, economic way and and. Then I think it's also a challenge to us now if we are changing. If we're changing the way that we do do things. You know what are the what are the things that we want to happen in that in that change. But also what do we need to be wary of like that might also be an unforeseen consequence that might be. And detrimental to people and how do we? How do we deal with that? So I think those words and you know, I think that there's all. There's a very big live conversation at the moment in anthropology about Anthropology's colonial legacy. About decolonization. About the openness to different voices about disciplinary centres and where they lie, and I think that you know that that there seems to be a direct potential relationship between conversations about flying and mobility and conferencing, and where you do your research and those conversations about called the coloniality in anthropology. So those along. Those kinds of lines I was thinking about the what would a low you know what? What would, what would the production of anthropological knowledge look like in a if we did it in a low carbon? Way and there's. Other people in this I've been talking to some people in other. Who are having same conversations instead of associated disciplines. So in media studies, for example, there's people having some interesting conversations about what happens if you know if you try to store the store, these kinds of conversations on a on a on a solar powered server, that means you don't have much storage space. And it's you know you've got to think about the the very kind of materiality of the media that you're using. Saying and and even like slowing things down so that same, but so that that the thing that I was referring to is a group called low carbon Methods Network based at being run by an paseka Trent University and and and they ran. She ran a workshop. And like created, she's been thinking about creating a Zine, like a print, literally kind of printed scene. She they sent, sent everyone a letter through the post kind of internationally and everyone had a little sachet of coffee that they could drink during the giving version. So there's some really creative ways in which, like we could think. OK. And of building the the media medium through which we create Connexions, and what their effects are. And there are people doing some really interesting work. In that area.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

So it sounds like it's sort of as a beginning of a journey happening there too, to fully conceptualise what it. What it will mean?

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

Yeah, yeah, and it's a space. It feels like a kind of space of possibility, which is nice because I think it can sometimes feel feel like it's a very like morally loaded. Uh, issue where it's all about people not.

Not being allowed to do things and being castigated for the way that the things that are actually out of their control. So to kind of shift it. Into more of a creative. Register I think is is is. Yeah, it's helpful.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

Professor Knox, what would be the first step for an academic student or professional staff member considering going flight free?

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

For me, I think being public about it made a difference. Maybe that's not for everyone, but I think that that that that helped me, but it helped me kind of feel like I'm more secure in being able to turn down invitations or ask people to, you know. Explain the situation and to explain why I wasn't flying and so, uhm. And I suppose then the other thing I would say is again to say that it's been much easier than I thought it would be. So you know, if it feels like it, you know, just give it go. And if it's not for you, it's. Really difficult, that's fine, like. That's it's not about saying that there's a that you know that there's one-size-fits-all and everyone should be doing the same thing. Uhm, but if people are already at the stage that they're trying to think about. Uhm, reducing their flying, you know? I, I think setting a period of time worked well as well, just. Saying I'm not going to fly for. A year or next six months and then it doesn't like tide or anything. Kind of long term, but.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

I love that. Yeah, you could say I'm letting you try for a semester, see what it see, what happens, how it feels and and work and go from there.

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

Yeah, yeah. Exactly, but you know, and I don't, and one of the criticisms is. Often, Oh well, you know it's it. It it's pointless because it doesn't make a difference in the greater scheme of things, but you know, I think that it has made me. If anything more kind of attentive to the the structural issues. Around the flying industry, it's made me more aware of the problems with carbon offsetting. It's made me kind of. Uh, I feel like I have more information to participate in those kinds of conversations with the university about what the. Appropriate responses are. So I'm sceptical of the idea that just doing it as an individual isn't worthwhile. I think it's worthwhile because it it can open doors for being able to participate. In those bigger conversations, which obviously is where the change is going to happen, it has to happen structurally. But it. But yeah, we're all positioned. Locally, at the same time, we're all we're all in a place. So that's where I think, yeah, that's.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

Definitely, and we haven't take cover that here. But one thing you do write about. One in your. Blog and one of the two was about the way that once you did take that decision and you did speak about it publicly, the conversations with colleagues and PhD students that those conversations. Would then happen. Others would begin to take action and they would sort of not put it in a binary. This either individual action or institutional action that of course, these two things feed into each other.

Speaker 4 - Hannah Knox

Yeah, yeah exactly. And you know now it's you know it's it's your. Your podcast is part of that institution. Build. Yeah, institutional level conversation which is.

Speaker 5

Yeah, yeah.

Speaker 1 - Noah Birksted-Breen

Thank you to Professor NOx and thank you for listening. This episode was written and produced by myself, Doctor Noah Birksted Green and edited by Ryan Beckerleg, a PhD student in the School of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Cardiff and radio host extraordinaire of Cardiff Student Radio. The artwork is by Ardour. New sketch the podcast music was written and composed by Julian Bell. If you've enjoyed this podcast, please help us to spread the flying less message by sharing your favourite episodes on social media and by recommending it to colleagues and students. The Flying less podcast. The podcast which asks what you and your university stand to gain by flying less.