

Business

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Zapping COVID: Tech sector takes aim at COVID with new gadgetry

Virus-zapping drones, smart masks and disease-predicting wearables

WASHINGTON: From virus-zapping drones to smart masks to disease-predicting wearables, the tech sector is showcasing ways to detect and mitigate the coronavirus outbreak. The health crisis which forced this week's 2021 Consumer Electronics Show online has also spawned innovations for fighting the pandemic.

Drone maker Draganfly showcased its camera technology which can be used to offer alerts on social distancing, and also detect changes in people's vital signs which may be early indicators of Covid-19 infections. Draganfly chief Cameron Chell said the "vital intelligence assessment" system can be "deployed from any camera, not just a drone camera," to measure vital signs such as heart or respiratory rate and blood pressure.

The company has been deploying its drones, which can spray disinfectant in large public spaces like stadiums, similar to other robotic disinfection systems being deployed during the pandemic. "This allows public places to have the opportunity to be opened up again," Chell told a CES online briefing. "We're completely overwhelmed with demand."

In a similar vein to the Draganfly system, Taiwan-based FaceHeart demonstrated its software which can be installed in cameras for contactless measurement of vital signs. FaceHeart said its algorithms scan for signs of severe shortness of breath, high fever, dehydration, elevated heart rate and other symptoms which are early indicators of COVID-19.

One new wearable tech device being shown at CES from Colorado-based BioIntelliSense is a coin-sized wearable sticker called BioButton

which can detect changes in vital signs that could be linked to Covid-19. The patch, meant to be worn on a person's chest, can detect skin temperature, heart rate, coughing frequency and more, according to the company.

The BioButton device, which is paired with mobile applications, "represents a significant advancement in making continuous medical-grade monitoring reliable, effortless and cost-effective," said company CEO James Mault. "The convenience of the BioButton will support a range of clinical use cases... and mass market use to enable safe return to work or school."

Smart masks, doorbells

Startup AirPop Health unveiled its Active+ Smart Mask which captures breathing-related data and incorporates a sensor which can tell wearers when to replace their mask's filter. "This product embodies the AirPop mission-to help people better understand and take control of their respiratory health through a human-centered approach to design, science and technology," said Chris Hosmer, AirPop's founder. The gaming tech firm Razer meanwhile showed its Project Hazel mask which features rechargeable ventilators and a transparent design "so those around you can view facial cues such as a smile or laugh and allow the hard of hearing to lip read what the wearer is saying," according to the company. Another gadget unveiled at the all-digital show was the Ettie video doorbell from the smart home startup Plott, which takes the temperature of a visitor at the front door with an infrared sensor, allowing consumers to see if a



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fever is present.

Meanwhile Taiwan-based electronics firm iWavenology introduced its iDistance wearable device which can be used to prevent infections by sounding an alarm when people fail to respect social distancing guidelines. The tags can be worn around a person's arm and can function in a workplace or outdoor environment. "The pandemic requires everyone to think about innova-

tive solutions to ensure safety for all employees at the workplace," founder Shau-Gang Mao said. "That is why iWavenology created a simple device that generates an alarm whenever a person comes too close to another."

The all-digital trade event, which was forced to move to an online format because of the pandemic, included some 1,800 exhibitors and concluded Thursday. —AFP

Emirates stops flights to three Australian cities

SYDNEY: Emirates has suspended flights to Australia's three largest cities as the country further restricts international arrivals over fears of new virus strains. The Dubai-based carrier was one of the last to maintain routes into and out of the country's east coast throughout most of the pandemic but on Friday evening told travellers a handful of planned flights next week would be the last. "Due to operational reasons, Emirates flights to/from Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne will be suspended until further notice," Emirates said on its website.

The airline will still run two flights a week to Perth, but the cuts are another barrier for tens of thousands of stranded Australians still attempting to return home. The Australian government responded by announcing more repatriation flights and said other carriers still flying services to the cities could fill the gap. "The capacity that Emirates was able to use within the cap will be allocated to other airlines,

ensuring that there are still as many tickets, as many seats available into Australia," Finance Minister Simon Birmingham said.

A small number of airlines—including Qatar Airways and Singapore Airlines—are still running services to Australia but local media were already reporting delays and cancellations among returning travellers. Australia's borders have effectively been closed since March to curb the spread of the virus, with the government even limiting the number of citizens allowed to return. Last week travel restrictions were further tightened, with arrival numbers slashed and all travellers into the country requiring a negative COVID-19 test before flying.

In making the changes, Prime Minister Scott Morrison cited a growing number of people in quarantine testing positive for new strains of COVID-19. Fears that a variant of the virus from Britain, believed to be more contagious, had leaked into Brisbane from hotel quarantine triggered a snap lockdown in the city last week. "There are many unknowns and uncertainties in relation to the new strain, and so that's why this precautionary approach, we believe, is very sensible," Morrison said. Australia continues to deal relatively well with the virus, having recorded about 28,600 cases and 909 deaths linked to COVID-19 in a population of 25 million. —AFP

Stellantis is born as Peugeot, Fiat complete merger

PARIS: The merger of France's PSA and US-Italian rival Fiat Chrysler becomes official yesterday, creating Stellantis, the world's fourth-biggest automaker by volume. The long-awaited 50/50 tie-up, which was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, is seen as crucial for the two groups to undertake the investment necessary to transition to clean car technology. The new company will bring together producers such as Peugeot, Citroen, Fiat, Chrysler, Jeep, Alfa Romeo and Maserati, each of which will continue under their own brand names.

The 14 Stellantis brands will account for about nine percent of the global auto market. Together they produced eight million vehicles in 2019.

Ranking behind global rivals such as Volkswagen, Renault-Nissan-Mitsubishi and Toyota, Stellantis will be the fourth-largest automaker by volume and the third-largest by revenue, with a workforce of over 400,000.

John Elkann, Fiat chairman and scion of Italy's storied Agnelli family, will retain his role at Stellantis in what he has called "a challenging era". "The coming decade will redefine mobility: we are intent on playing a leading role in building this new future," Elkann said earlier this month after the shareholders gave their blessing to what he called the "historic merger".

On Monday the new group Stellantis, the name derived from the Latin verb "stellio" meaning to brighten with stars, will launch on the Milan and Paris stock exchanges followed by its debut in the New York stock market the following day. In



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November PS chief Carlos Tavares warned that "only the most agile, with a Darwinian spirit, will survive".

On Tuesday Tavares, as Stellantis chief executive officer, will hold the new group's first news conference, laying out the vision for the newly merged automaker. The challenges are many, to turn the range of vehicles to electric-power, to coax back into the new car market drivers who have switched to used cars or rentals, plus the ongoing coronavirus pandemic which is putting major dents into many industries.

PSA's global sales — Peugeot, Citroen, DS, Opel, Vauxhall — fell by 27.8 percent last year. Matthias Heck of Moody's sees the merger as a good thing for both the French and Italian makers because it will "improve their global coverage, they can collaborate at the technological level and in various segments and will save money through the synergies and experience of PSA, which has been able to set the right price and manage its costs". —AFP



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