IDG as starting point: sports car or runner?

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On slide one, I show my students two pictures, a runner and a sports car. “Which of the two is faster?” I ask. “The car”, a student replies. On the next slide the same car and runner appear, with no room to move between the trees. “The runner is faster now”, one student sighs. Then I ask who has travelled more than 60 miles today to sit here in the lecture hall. "80 miles by car, on the highway", a student replies. "You'd be faster here on foot than the car would be here," I claim...

Admittedly, the sports car had covered the distance much faster on the roads than the student had walked. But from the parking lot to here, in the lecture hall? Into the building, through the corridors, up the stairs and then into the lecture hall. The car would have to be completely disassembled, in parts that are small enough to be brought upstairs into the hall and reassembled. This takes a week rather than a day. Walking 80 miles goes faster!

With this example I try to make it clear that we are overlooking many aspects in our reasoning. For a car to be successful, thousands of miles of asphalt, drainage systems, filling and charging stations must be built and maintained, right through the (ecological) landscape, and so on. We tend to focus on only one aspect, such as speed (cars are faster than walking or cycling), emissions (cars are polluting, particulate matter, CO2), energy, (material) costs, accident risk, convenience, etc. Rarely are we able to zoom out to see the whole picture, in other words, to think integrally. Car mobility costs so much more than just the energy needs (and pollution) of car engines. Consider, for example, infrastructural materials (road surfaces, lighting, crash barriers, drainage systems), degradation of natural landscapes and consequences for animals and plants, psychological and social disruption of people, e.g. a change in community spirit as a result of the disconnection between place of residence and work. With the speed with which we have started to bridge distances, our world has become larger, and our enlivening of it (living technology) has therefore become wider and flatter (some writers speak of more horizontal).

Cognitive skill

IDG 2 – cognitive skill – is about strengthening this thinking ability in yourself. I ask the students to think about the relationship between the highway and the digital highway, to escape singular thinking (as opposed to integral or multiple thinking), perhaps one of the biggest culprits that keeps us from quitting the unbridled technological growth in every imaginable direction. I challenge the class: “Associate, integrate, connect”.

Because of my background in Artificial Intelligence, students (and colleagues) regularly ask me what I think of ChatGPT, or more broadly, Generative AI. In terms of content, I do not feel the need to go into this, I like to leave this to others, for example with regard to plagiarism and copyright issues, or the decline of the internet due to an exponential increase in automatically (non-human) generated texts.

In my answer, I argue that as we adapt our world to car mobility or data-driven information transfer, we soon find that we begin to adapt our natural mobility (walking, running, crawling, jumping, dancing) to the infrastructures for this artificial (fast car)mobility. To keep a car on the road, we started thinking in terms of possibilities and limitations associated with car mobility: wheels, roads, energy supply, maintenance, accident risks, damage.

Our ecological "being" (IDG1) disappears from the picture. In our thinking, acting and feeling we become a version of ourselves, which is completely adapted to the (digital) highway. This gives rise to the illusion that the sports car is faster than the runner, or that the AI is smarter than the scientist. Illusion, because we are not our instrument (IDG1). In addition, sloppy (singular) thinking (IDG2). Unbridled growth, unbridled credit, gives debt that must be repaid, the Inner Development Goals offer a good starting point!