

Putting out the fire (Part 1)

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Boundlessness leads to ... even more boundlessness. Especially digital techniques have enabled us to enjoy music, literature and communication to an unlimited extent. Images, sounds and other files can even bridge the largest distances on Earth in just a few milliseconds via the World Wild Web (and satellites). Everyone has a camera on his smartphone with a resolution that would have made Hollywood cameramen jealous only twenty years ago. In principle, digital connection would be less demanding for the planet and therefore more sustainable than travelling. Reading pages from a screen is much more sustainable than reading paper, just like music via MP3 instead of vinyl. But is that also true?

Unfortunately, the opposite is true. "We're putting out the fire with gasoline". We now travel more miles per person per year than ever before. People can now work everywhere, even at home, using digital techniques. To a certain extent, the distance between living and working has become irrelevant. But the need to meet physically just seems to have increased. Scarcity strengthens the need to meet each other. And because digital contacts are laid just as easily over two meters as between two continents, there is a need for physical contact over longer distances. The number of air passengers has more than doubled in the last 10 years. In higher education, we encourage our students to gain experience abroad. In other words, digital technology has made the world smaller, so that the unlimited contacts that have come with it have become a new revenue model for the travel industry. A richer digital connection, for example FaceTime instead of just sound, only stimulates travel needs. We're putting out the fire with petrol ...

Although global awareness has increased, our long-term behaviour is untenable - even Trump seems no longer to deny climate change - we do little or nothing about it. On the contrary, politics seems to be held hostage by populism and public denial, which are expressed in short-term slogans and extremely short-term recognition/memory. For example, more money for technology development and education. Technology must provide the solution - make the world more sustainable - but more technology leads to more problems. It's like Pandora's Box: for every short-term solution of a problem, ten even bigger problems arise. Science and political parties - even the green ones - remain enthusiastic about better (technology) education and greener cities, but seem to have already given up that there is a way back. As mentioned, more money for technology education and research, so that science enables a more efficient energy transition, is the best I read in the programmes. "Is this the World we created", Freddy Mercury sings more and more audibly in my head, almost 30 years after his death.

Boundless behaviour. Social scientists, psychologists, what do we do about it? I read in the paper this morning that a truck driver made a steering error and died in a dire situation, on the A58. Miles of traffic jam behind the accident. Dozens of people have left their car to use the camera on their Smart Phone to film how the victim is resuscitated and still dies. In Hollywood quality. The agent who spoke to the people about this was told that "he had to interfere with his own". Every form of respect has disappeared. Boundlessness is the result of unlimited availability, unlimited technology. Again the chorus: we're putting out the fire ... And our governments seem to ignore the problems for the sake of maintaining voter support and invest billions of euros a year for technological development.

A counter-movement is certainly also visible. People who moderate themselves, music on vinyl instead of MP3, vegetarianism, yoga, etc. But please politicians, do not give up. And colleagues in science, let us help with all our powers, so that there is also a world for our children and grandchildren! I don't mean helping by, for example, designing a virus in a Dan Brown / Hollywood scenario that makes at least 80% of humanity infertile, so that a "cultural forest fire" develops and the planet and drastically depleted humanity get hundreds of years to "calm down". Letting it take its course - that seems to be the current "choice" - seems to be little different from the technique stimulation that is politically widespread: the "nature" eventually also knows how to turn our boundlessness. But, can we really do better?