



DIGITAL HIGH

By Frank Sonder and Stephan Sigrist

The buzz about digitalisation is loud enough. But what will remain at the end of the day? Maybe primarily a yearning for the transitory.

The digital community is like a big, exuberant party in a student flat. Agents and agencies, prophets and disciples, rebels and users gossip and twitter in general, animated confusion. In contrast to the sedate and stylish dinner parties with clear seating arrangements and fixed rules, this chaotic party is full of teenagers all talking loudly at the same time in order to be heard. Hardly a moment passes without newly arrived guests talking about brand-new, pioneering possibilities and applications, about websites and apps, about Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, Instagram and Tumblr. And all this stuff is supposed to make life easier and more efficient.

And the revolution has just begun. With the miniaturisation of computer chips, the technology is disappearing more and more from our gaze. The next step will take the networking of everyday items to an Internet of objects, in which fridges will talk to wallets, cars to cardiac pacemakers and pot plants to central heating systems. The good old-fashioned analogue world will not be spared either. Because more and more products are dissolving into the virtual world and whole music collections, libraries and photo albums are dematerialising into the black hole of

digitalisation, homes and offices are being redesigned. Furniture manufacturers are having to change their thinking as well. Ikea, for example, recently revamped its long-running hit, the Billy bookcase. Because fewer and fewer people physically possess books and music, the next generation has been transformed from shelves into glass display cabinets which are now aimed at showing off collectors' items such as vases or art. And it seems that not even humans can escape the consequences of digitalisation. Neuropsychologists have discovered that multitasking and quick decision making skills are improved by frequent use of the Internet.

However, despite the advances and breakthroughs – or possibly because of them – even the more spectacular reports of exponential progress in the digital world often fail to impress nowadays. The excited stories about Moore's law – which states that computer power doubles every 18 months – have become as mundane as the fact that aeroplanes fly. That the Internet has fundamentally transformed the world in the last 15 years and that the ways in which we exchange ideas and information, maintain social contacts, conclude transactions and carry out research are changing at dizzying speed is no secret these days. Continuous change has become a constant.

In this environment of permanent innovation and with changes becoming more and more impossible to perceive, it is time to leave the intoxicating party for a while – and examine the question of the hype's long-term consequences.

What, then, will remain of the great digital high? Here are three hypotheses:

1. Personal responsibility through confusion

One core benefit of the Internet is the networking of institutions, people and things. Yet the complexity of the resulting structures grows with every participant and is a cause of the frequently-cited information overload. Although Google and co. have long been promising us orientation and simplicity, this promise is being constantly undermined, or exposed as pseudo-objectivity since, for example, positions in the Google rankings can be manipulated relatively easily. Researchers have set themselves the goal of developing algorithms which should in the future deliver useful bases for decision-making from the growing, unstructured data volumes on the Internet. Will that be possible? The question of when we will make the longed-for journey to Mars is no less open. As a result, the excessive demands made on us in handling the confusion are constantly present. That may seem sobering at first glance, but could have a very positive effect on society. Because in the face of the Internet chaos, old values like personal responsibility and independent thinking are on the rise again: only those with the ability to critically review the more-than-plentiful information available can really develop new knowledge or opinions of their own. From that point of view, we are taking a big step closer to the Enlightenment ideal of the responsible human being – not due to the transparency of the Internet, but precisely because of its impenetrability and the need to form your own ideas.

2. Appreciation of transience

It is a well known fact that the Internet doesn't forget. Anything that goes online stays online forever. Our digital traces never disappear. Agencies specialising in deleting undesired online entries are already available for those who want to avoid such permanence. While many people still succumb to the deceptive appearance of supposed anonymity, awareness of the risks of unconsidered blog postings or unflattering photos is bound to grow. That is one point. And another is that since nothing ages online and any number of reproductions can be made with the copy-and-paste function, an appreciation of transitory things will increase. The value we place on the almost unlimited memory capacity of our iPods is equal to the loss in worth of our individual music albums. And who among us still has an overview of the thousands of holiday snaps, party or baby photos? The digital photo albums will turn yellow without actually losing their sheen: they will just eventually be ignored. The yearning for tangible, physical objects that grow old along with us will increase.

3. Triviality – and hope

Digital platforms are used effectively today – and will be used tomorrow – for the exchange of information, financial market transactions and research. However, a greater part – perhaps even the most important one – of the data volume comes from home-made videos by keen self-promoters or cat owners wishing to share their velvet-pawed companions' life with the world. We assume that the Internet will go down in the digital history Wikipedias of the 22nd century importantly or even primarily as the platform for all our hopes of a little bit of attention, entertainment or

diversion from the often so linear and orderly everyday world. Andy Warhol's widely known "15 minutes of fame" for everyone on earth is closer to realisation than ever before. Whether or not this self-promotion has a relevance beyond narcissism is beside the point. It may even be immaterial, because what counts in the end is neither fame nor status, but 15 minutes of hearty, trivial laughter echoing down the infinite distances of the digital universe. Many people ask themselves the next day what they got out of the big party in the student flat. As the effects of the Alka-Seltzer tablet set in, they may well come to a realisation of the contacts they would prefer not to pursue. The very least that will remain, however, is one telephone number that could be the beginning of a wonderful friendship.

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