

Is information technology environmentally friendly? By Olivier Berthelier, CTO Limonetik

PARIS, ILE-DE-FRANCE, FRANCE, February 27, 2019 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The expansion of technology is adding to energy use in [digital technology](#), which amounts to 10% of world electricity consumption. This skyrocketing figure is raising flags. Our digital activities are energy-intensive: They account for nearly 4% of greenhouse gas emissions. We are warned about the environmental impact of the digital industry, which is accused, moreover, of "greenwashing". Could there such a thing as an ecologically virtuous digital industry?

The answer may not apparent, and with no certainties could we try to awaken our consciences and imagine how to make digital activity environmentally responsible? Can IT be environmentally friendly?

Global impact is not always easy to measure

What with global warming, our digital lifestyle has come increasingly under fire. We have grown used to having everything at our fingertips: videos on Youtube, high-definition shows on Netflix, social media of all kinds, etc. With online commerce, some people are touting the environmental benefits of logistic optimisation but others accuse it of promoting impulse purchases. Overall, applications are increasingly power-hungry, with greater masses of data sent over media supported by more and more powerful infrastructures. These applications, which we use incessantly, are taking over our daily lives.

According to ConsoGlobe an environmentally conscious online magazine, data centres will use up 104 billion kWh in 2020. The alarming figure of IT energy consumption is constantly increasing. In 2018, the Shift Project, a Paris-based think tank, ascertained this fact: the exponential growth of the digital world is a danger to the planet. The carbon footprint of servers, networks and terminals is rising by 9% per year. In addition, it is still very difficult to properly recycle the rare compounds required for electronic systems and batteries to operate.

On the other hand, digital technology has made it easier for people to communicate between continents and use optimum-quality videoconferences, thus saving participants from travelling. BigData and the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) also have a positive impact. Although this technology may be a heavy energy consumer it could also help us to optimise tasks that would





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otherwise have a negative effect on the environment: intelligent inventory management to reduce waste; optimisation of electric power distribution; more eco-conscious design of products after analysis of complex production constraints; recyclability of materials; improved irrigation of fields, to name just a few examples.

It all depends on how we use these powerful tools.

Let's not be afraid of results. But what are the benefits?

Techies often bury their heads in the sand when it comes to environmental and social issues. But we should be wary of what psychologists call cognitive dissonance. In psychology, an individual who feels mental distress (cognitive dissonance) when confronted with a contradiction to a personal value or belief will try to rationalize decisions to resolve the contradiction. People use all sorts of avoidance strategies to minimize a mental conflict.

Yet it would be a serious mistake not to face up to the truth. That new technology satisfies our needs in the immediate term, helps us to interact and create new ways of living (since 2012 internet access has been considered by the United Nations as a fundamental right), is certainly no excuse to ignore unpleasant facts. We should be fully aware of the consequences of our acts. People should realise the impact they have. We shouldn't hide our business activity behind an ecological fig leaf. A company needs more to clear its name than simply a [corporate social responsibility](#) (CSR) charter. We should beware of the greenwashing craze – responsibility involves more than sorting waste.

Just what is our responsibility?

As technology players, we must ask the right questions. Our goal is not simply to display good conduct but to adopt a process of sincerity. Awareness of the planetary consequences of our acts is forcing us to think about ourselves and what we do. Playing by the regulatory rules of the game is certainly required but it is no longer sufficient: the legislative system is slow to react to the challenges that are threatening our environment. Every individual should ask questions that will inevitably cause distress – but without succumbing to cognitive dissonance.

In 1979, Hans Jonas published the *The Imperative of Responsibility*. In this book the author reflects on the notion of responsibility for the future of mankind: responsibility toward others. The objective behind his moral and metaphysical idea is sustainable development. The digital revolution inevitably intersects with that of ecological transition. Let us admit that our activities are polluting the world and, where the two revolutions intersect, seek a compromise between the power of digital technology and the importance of the environment.

Where does that leave us?

There is no real culprit, because the [IT sector](#) has both a positive and negative social, environmental and economic impact. Everyone bears responsibility and, of course, IT businesses are no exception to the rule. We should conduct carbon assessments, promote data centres that run on low-carbon electricity, and favour environmentally friendly suppliers (though they may be slightly dearer than their competitors). We should think twice about our customers and preferably develop business in markets that respect our ecosystem. We should raise employee awareness, and employees will in turn sensitise the people around them. There is no shortage of means for action, and every effort counts. We should invest in ambitious but genuine CSR policies and finally commit to gaining market share only by promoting companies that are the most accountable – and hold the all others up to the same standards.

"There's nothing I can do for the man who asks no questions." Confucius

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