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‘I’d rather die in a democracy than live in a sustainable dictatorship’

Between China and the US, Europe can find a third way to build a sustainable, democratic society, argues Stephan Rammler

Read this interview in German.

As a researcher into the future of mobility, you recently dedicated much of your time to investigating the relationship between digital transformation and sustainability. Is the digital revolution driving sustainable economic restructuring? Or is it the final nail in the coffin?

Digital transformation has the potential to make sustainability possible in its entirety. However, we first need to develop new ways of living with the help of digital technologies and media. It simply won’t work unless we change our current societal conditions, our consumer habits and routines, our political and economic institutions and our urban and settlement structures.

We would be kidding ourselves if we thought that the power of digital technology alone is enough to ensure sustainability. Allowing something as ground-breaking as digitalisation to develop on its own in our long-standing traditional culture would just lead to unprecedented growth in one location and social instability and upheaval in another. That would put us on a slippery road: society would start to crumble, as would our democracy.

How do we know that digital transformation will support sustainable development, rather than prevent it?

To help explain the potential downsides, there are four areas that we can categorise them into: first, the legal aspects; second, socio-ecological resilience; third, the use of resources in digital technologies and media; and lastly, the economic rebound effects, if the savings from efficiency gains are simply used for further consumption.

When you say legal aspects, what kind of risks do you see specifically?

This is about the civil liberties of individuals on the one hand, but it's also about ensuring a functioning democracy and making sure that political processes cannot be manipulated. The network effects of large, algorithm-based social media are becoming increasingly powerful and influential. Democracies are easily influenced and manipulated by interests that are far from representing the will of the people. Take the Cambridge Analytica scandal as an example.

Technology giants are always striving to improve their services, as their customer groups are getting bigger and their competition is dwindling. AI is getting better and better, as the amount of data that can be used to apply machine learning is growing. There's no economic power to counter it. The Big Five – Apple, Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft and Google's parent company Alphabet – are now so large that they can only be tackled with political regulation.

What do you propose?

Open-data governance systems in municipalities are one example. If a company exceeds a certain size, it should be forced to share part of its data with others. We need to replace the proprietary data governance models, which are driving big data companies, with open-data governance approaches.

German Social Democratic Party leader Andrea Nahles has taken up this proposal – rightly so. Municipal data will then be available to everyone. With that data, we can harness machine learning for the benefit of providers other than Facebook, Amazon and Google. Those alternative providers can then develop functional AI-based services. But the first place to start is getting the raw material – the data – through decentralised data governance approaches.

How do we change the way we use natural resources?

As things stand, we cannot say that the use of resources in digital technologies and the media from cradle to grave is sustainable. That goes for all three dimensions of sustainability: economic, environmental and societal. There's no such thing as a closed resource cycle. The way in which rare-earth elements are extracted in the Congo is destabilising society there and creating new refugee crises. We are seeing neo-imperialist strategies to exploit resources. Extracting and transporting those resources involves the use of fossil fuels. Everything to do with AI also requires a lot of energy. That has to come from somewhere.

Why is socio-ecological resilience so important?

Next to societal, economic and environmental dimensions, resilience is another aspect of sustainability. In the future, we will be increasingly confronted with poor resilience in infrastructure systems – and societal systems. Everything that is digital is vulnerable. It can be rendered inoperable. It can be destroyed. We should never lose sight of that, considering today's smart city and smart mobility concepts. So, if we want these concepts to underpin sustainable societal systems, then we need to solve the huge vulnerability problem.

And what about the economic rebound effects?

If we leave things as they are now, if we continue to pursue an economic policy of growth, performance and competition, with sharper, more powerful instruments, we will accelerate growth and resource consumption even further. But we should not use digital efficiency to make things more sustainable only to then use that new-found sustainability to generate further growth.

Where do the greatest dangers lurk in your view?

We mustn't only judge technologies on whether they make mobility or energy systems more sustainable and more efficient in terms of usage. If we do, then we run the risk of adopting totalitarian economic approaches or politically-motivated regulatory systems in the pursuit of greater energy efficiency and sustainability. That's like letting in totalitarianism through the back door. We would suddenly find ourselves with oligopolies or monopolies that we cannot regulate anymore. I believe that the train has already left the station for China and North America. But in Europe, we still have a chance to catch that train.

So Europe can serve as an alternative model?

I hope so. Our only chance is to try and pursue this third way in Europe. To do that, we must try to build up our liberal democracies, social market economies and European social welfare to serve as role models. We need to capitalise on digital technologies and media to sustain our model. We should not use them just to boost economic growth, as they do in California and China. Nor should we use them to control the population. But we only have this opportunity if the whole of Europe cooperates well with each other.

Do you think Germany is well-prepared to use digital transformation as an opportunity for sustainable development?

Germany is not in a good position to compete in the mainstream areas yet. The country, for example, intends to spend €3bn on artificial intelligence, which it naively believes will propel it to the top when it comes to AI research. But if a province in China alone can spend ten to a hundred times more on AI, then you will see the actual power balances and the situation in the economic spheres. That figure on its own says it all, the role that Europe can actually play.

But you would still argue for a European solution?

Because the upheaval is so great, we need to stand shoulder to shoulder. The German car industry has understood this at least to some extent, as we can see in the partnership between BMW and Daimler. In fact, at some point we will need to have some sort of alliance involving the entire European car industry. That would compare to what is currently being planned in China.

In this era of globalisation, Germany's problems can no longer be solved within Germany alone. We can only solve them within Europe. But politically and culturally, populations are still deeply rooted in the nation-state world. That is actually a reaction to globalisation. But we won't be able to solve our problems by hiding behind a national identity. We rather need to pursue our own European pathway within Europe, globally united on an economic and political front. That's what I propose: standing shoulder to shoulder as Europeans. But what I am currently observing in Europe is the exact opposite.

You mentioned that people, or rather consumers, need to fundamentally change their lifestyle. How do you win people's support for this?

I believe that the population can only be won over to a certain degree. Moral persuasion is used as a soft policy time and time again from the toolbox of political measures. But it has its limits, when it comes to habits or even concepts of justice. I believe that the only way is political regulation and a strong state, which has the courage to tackle certain issues and proudly say: we are regulating that now. I do not believe that private consumption will save the world, because the dependencies are so great and the public are too accustomed to convenience.

Aren't authoritarian states at an advantage here, since they can effect radical change?

I'd rather die in a democracy than live in a sustainable dictatorship. Climate change is still a better option than losing our civil liberties. At some point, we will discuss the future of democracy in Europe against

the backdrop of what's happening in China and North America. The more we get bogged down in climate and environmental policy needs, the more legitimate it will be for us to debate fundamental democratic institutions.

But there's no right life in the wrong one, as the philosopher Theodor Adorno said. And that applies here as well: we must not allow dictatorial, totalitarian measures in the name of the environment.

Where do you see the greatest risks of destabilisation over the next few years?

Migration developments in Africa. Neither German politicians nor the German scientific elite have absolutely any idea of what's going on in Africa. The change in demographics is enormous. Looking at the ongoing economic integration of Africa by the EU, it's clear that we are ultimately responsible for the migration. We just turn a blind eye to it. Whether it's arms exports, oil imports or harvesting resources for our smartphones. There's no solidarity at all. That's why we are experiencing such strong pressure from Africa, through this combination of climate change, digital resource mining and population explosion, which is destabilising southern European countries in such a way that it could spell the end of the EU.

How can the tide be turned?

Europe would do well to use digital technologies, media and fair trade to build an independent African-European cooperation model and try to help Africa along the path towards a sustainable future with support from European technology.

That's our alternative model: stand shoulder to shoulder with Africa on a humanitarian basis and with fair trade relations. We could actually export our own digital, societal model. But instead, China is beginning to invest in Africa. This offers hope to Africa, but it also means that China is exporting its model. Then, maybe someday, we will have reasonably stable conditions in Africa, which could even help alleviate the migration crisis. This would be a good thing for Africa, as far as economic development is concerned. Not so much for political developments. As for the global economic and geopolitical distribution of power, the influence from Europe will be much smaller.

This interview was conducted by https://www.ips-journal.eu/about/writers-and-contributors/writer/claudia-detsch-1/Claudia Detsch.



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