CLIMATE CRISIS: THE UNSUSTAINABLE USE OF ONLINE VIDEO

The practical case study of online video

Report led by Maxime Efoui-Hess for the think tank The Shift Project

The Paris Agreement commits all the governments of the planet to drastically reduce their greenhouse gas emissions from now to the end of the next decade. Any increase in energy consumption will make this historic challenge of avoiding climate chaos more difficult to overcome. Meeting this challenge demands rethinking the world’s energy consumption, 80% of which is today provided by fossil fuels. This can only be considered by reviewing the functioning of each of our sectors of activity, all currently highly dependent on non-renewable resources.

A large share of public opinion and our economic and political decision-makers still consider that digital technologies do not require the same level of scrutiny as other sectors, regarding their compatibility with energy and climate imperatives. Nonetheless, the direct and indirect environmental impacts (“rebound effects”) linked to the uses of digital technologies are both unsustainable and increasing rapidly.

Digital technologies now emit 4% of greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), that is to say more than civil aviation. This share could double from now to 2025 to reach 8% of all GHG emissions, i.e. the current share of car emissions. Reducing the threat of climate change requires drastically reducing global greenhouse gas emissions in the next few years; however, the energy consumption required for digital technologies is increasing by 9% a year.

In October 2018, The Shift Project published the report “Lean ICT – Towards digital sobriety”. In it we recommended making digital transition compatible with climate imperatives and the constraints of resources. Digital sobriety consists in prioritizing the allocation of resources as a function of uses, in order to conform to the planet’s physical boundaries, while preserving the most valuable societal contributions of digital technologies. This requires questioning the pertinence of how we use digital technologies, one of which is online video whose use we focus on here.

**Context - An unsustainable and growing impact**

![Distribution of energy consumption per source for production (45%) and use (55%) of digital equipment in 2017](Source: Lean ICT, The Shift Project 2018)
ONLINE VIDEO IS NOT A DEMATERIALIZED USE

Intensive use is now made of online video. Stored in data centers, videos are transferred to our terminals (computers, smartphones, connected TVs, etc.) via networks (cables, optical fiber, modems, mobile network antennae, etc.): all these processes require electricity whose production consumes resources and usually involves CO₂ emissions.

- Video is a dense medium of information: 10 hours of high definition video comprises more data than all the articles in English on Wikipedia in text format!
- In 2018, online video viewing generated more than 300 MtCO₂, i.e. as much greenhouse gas as Spain emits: 1% of global emissions.
- Pornographic videos make up 27% of all online video traffic in the world. Taken alone, in 2018 they generated more than 80 MtCO₂, i.e. as much as all France’s households: close to 0.2% of global emissions.
- The greenhouse gas emissions of VoD (video on demand) services (e.g. Netflix and Amazon Prime) are equivalent to those of a country like Chile (more than 100 MtCO₂eq/year, i.e. close to 0.3% of global emissions), the country hosting the COP25 in 2019.

DIGITAL SOBRIETY REQUIRES THE REGULATION OF USES

- The purpose of digital sobriety is to make the digital system resilient: the aim is to create a framework that generates uses compatible with the constraints on resources.
- Regulation is the process by which we can ensure that uses are in phase with the physical constraints that are imposed on the digital system. Two tools are required to build it: the lever of legislation and the design of the systems that generate uses.
- Addictive designs (autoplay, embedded videos, etc.) are incompatible with digital sobriety, since they are aimed at maximizing the quantity of content consumed. The broadcasting platforms (their design, the underlying economic model, audience metrics, etc.) play a central role in the form taken by uses and thus their environmental impact. So, uses are to a great extent the product of a system, and not the sole result of individual consumer behavior.
- Reducing the uses of digital technologies therefore requires regulating the mechanisms that generate these uses: neither the self-regulation of broadcasting platforms nor the voluntary decisions of users will suffice.

REGULATION REQUIRES PRECISE PROCEDURES

- At the individual level, being “digitally sober” in one’s online video consumption means using the lowest definition that can be used to benefit from contents, reducing one’s consumption, and being more selective about what one watches.
- On the collective level, collaboration between the actors concerned is required to develop sobriety: regulatory bodies, politicians, service providers, the law, and the users.
- The prioritization of uses is the key challenge of the debate, in a world threatened by climate change: there is a risk of a random selection of uses occurring in any case if we do not reflect upstream on the uses we wish to preserve in priority.
- The global dimension of the digital system demands both national and international regulatory tools: an excellent subject for the European Union.

REGULATION FOR SOBRIETY IS A REALISTIC SOCIETAL DEBATE

- Regulation in favor of digital sobriety is compatible with the principle of “net neutrality”, which concerns the signification of contents, not their volume. Digital sobriety is aimed at making the digital system resilient, and managing it as a common good.
- Prioritizing uses means evaluating respective pertinences. However, the evaluation of societal pertinence goes far beyond technical environmental evaluation and must be carried out on the scale of society.
- This evaluation must rely on tools that are already available such as the sociology of uses and on the competences of existing regulatory bodies (in France: ARCEP, CNIL, CSA, Hadopi; in Europe: BEREC).
- The ongoing reflection on the regulation of hateful online content shows that serious discussion is possible, when there is a risk for societal integrity. There is no need for further proof of the societal risk linked to environmental constraints at a time when a “state of climatic emergency” is being evoked.
The rapid growth in the total volume of data – thus of energy consumption and its associated greenhouse emissions – is to a great extent due to video. This evolution runs counter to the objectives of the Paris Agreement.

20% OTHER VIDEOS

We have chosen to separate online videos from other types of video, that bring together here: live television streaming, live video (Skype, "camgirls", teledicine, etc.) video monitoring, etc.

This type of video makes up 20% of the total flow of data.

60% ONLINE VIDEO

The largest share of video flows can be placed in the "online video" category. It represented 1.05 thousand billion billion bytes (1.05 zetta-bytes) in 2018, i.e. 60% of world data flows. It is thus the main type of video use and the main use of digital technology as a whole.

This generates 306 million tons of CO₂, i.e. 20% of the total greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) due to digital technology (utilization and production of all equipment confounded) and nearly 1% of world greenhouse gas emissions. Online video covers 4 main types of content.

34% VoD (in online video)

These are videos hosted on streaming platforms that broadcast film and serial type contents (Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc.), grouped under the name VoD, for Video on Demand.

VoD represents 34% of online videos, 20% of total data flows and 7% of total GHG emissions due to digital technology.

27% PORNOGRAPHY (in online video)

These are videos hosted on streaming platforms with pornographic content (Pornhub, YouPorn, XVideo, etc.). This excludes, for example, direct streaming, photos, etc.

Online pornographic videos represent 27% of online videos, 16% of the total flow of data and 5% of total GHG emissions due to digital technology.

"Tubes" represent 21% of online video, 13% of the total data flow and 4% of total GHG emissions due to digital technology.

18% OTHERS (in online video)

These are videos hosted by social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat, Twitter, etc.) and other online videos (small streaming services, videos hosted directly on a site).

These other types of use represent 18% of online video, 11% of total data flows and 4% of GHG emissions due to digital technologies.

306 million tons of CO₂ is what the "online video" category generated in 2018.
Since we are constrained by climate crisis and the planet’s finite raw resources, not choosing means potentially allowing pornography to mechanically limit the bandwidth available for telemedicine, or allow the use of Netflix to limit access to Wikipedia.

In the 21st century, not choosing is no longer a viable option.
The browser extension (add-on) "Carbonalyser" allows to visualize the electricity consumption and associated greenhouse gas emissions of Internet browsing. It compares this impact to the equivalent of kilometers traveled by car or number of smartphone charges, hence "materializing" digital uses.

It helps you to have a better understanding that, even hidden behind our screens, the impacts of digital technology on the climate and our consumption of resources are a reality.

Available on Firefox, this extension was developed with The Shift Project by Richard Hanna, developer and host of podcast techologie.net, and Gauthier Roussilhe, designer and researcher on transition and low-tech issues on gauthierroussilhe.com.

This video was produced by Science Explainers, a company specialized in the distribution and promotion of scientific topics (www.scienceexplainers.com), in partnership with The Shift Project.

The guide was created by Gauthier Roussilhe, designer and researcher on transition and low-tech issues on gauthierroussilhe.com, and finalized with the team of think tank The Shift Project, which has been using it since May 2019.
On the basis of the case study of online video, The Shift Project proposes an initial series of questions to be asked explicitly in view to reducing the impact of digital uses intelligently, and thus implementing digital sobriety. The Shift Project consulted a panel of experts and academics specialized in the societal issues of digital technology and online video, including: Jean-Samuel Beuscart (LSIS), Jocelyn Lachance (University of Pau), Julien Marcinkowski (expert in change management), Marion Muracciole (expert in gender equality), Gauthier Roussilhe (designer) and Lan Anh Vu Hong (expert in web marketing). These interviews have been combined with a literature review, calculations and an analysis of reports from regulatory bodies.

Maxime Efoui-Hess - Project manager, main modeler and lead author for The Shift Project
Maxime Efoui-Hess joined The Shift Project to work on information and communication technologies. An engineer specialized in climate and computer modeling, he graduated with degrees in Energy, Transport and Environment from ISAE-SUPAÉRO and in Climate Dynamics from the Université Paul Sabatier and the French Meteorology University in Toulouse. He has also worked on the physical mechanisms of heatwaves and the future climate of France and Europe at the European Centre of Advanced research and Education in Scientific Calculation (CERFACS), in Toulouse. He is co-author with Hugues Ferreboeuf of the report “Lean ICT - Towards a digital sobriety” (The Shift Project 2019).

ABOUT THE SHIFT PROJECT
The Shift Project is a French think tank advocating the shift to a post-carbon economy. As a non-profit organization committed to serving the general interest through scientific objectivity, we are dedicated to informing and influencing the debate on energy transition in Europe.

The Shift Project is supported by industry leaders that want to make the energy transition their strategic priority. Since our foundation in 2010, we have achieved a significant impact on national and European policy-making.

ABOUT OUR PARTNER SCIENCE EXPLAINERS
Specialized in video production, Science Explainers focuses on scientific topics. Whether for communication between experts or with citizens, the Science Explainers team feels fully involved in its role of transmitting scientific information.

Through videos such as the one produced with the think tank The Shift Project on the energy consumption of digital technology, Science Explainers is committed to explaining complex statistics in order to enable policy leaders and citizens to make informed choices.