Rethinking digital product and service design to fit within planetary boundaries

An experiment to explore ways of designing less wasteful digital products

As the climate crisis deepens, there's a need to rethink how we design our digital technology so it's fit for a sustainable future within our ecological limits.

It's been estimated that the tech industry accounts for 2% of global carbon emissions, which has drawn comparisons to the aviation industry. As technology's energy use grows and it's carbon footprint increases, it's becoming clear that infinite digital growth and wasteful digital products and services need to be rethought and redesigned to fit within our planetary boundaries.

I have been experimenting with designing less energy and carbon intensive digital products and services. One of these prototypes is a reimagining of Instagram, where instead of all photos and videos automatically being loaded and displayed, a user can browse their feed in a lighter text format and choose to view the content they want to see. This would of course have to be done at the platform level at Instagram and this isn't a solution but an experiment designed to try and open up the conversation within the design and tech communities.

In this prototype, user's posts are interpreted into text by using alt text or an image recognition algorithm, showing users a text based representation of the content in their feed. Rather than automatically being shown everything in an algorithmically ordered feed, geared towards maximising attention and interactions, the user can tap to view content they actually want to see. As you choose to look at more content, you fill up your own energy meter, which is depicted in the gradient bar on top of the feed.

Importantly, this isn't and shouldn't be about shaming users or burdening them with the responsibility. The responsibility for reducing carbon and energy use in the digital world should start with those of us designing and building digital products and services.

If we start designing technologies more thoughtfully and sustainably it gives us the chance to create a digital world that is future proof, powered completely off sustainable energy and is accessible to everyone all around the world. The internet is an vital tool and I believe it will be essential to communicating, organising and building a more sustainable future within our ecological limits.

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