

Unfuck Nature with a Click: Green Tech, Smart, Porn, & a Bunch of Technosolutionism

Davide Bevilacqua

Davide Bevilacqua is a media artist and a curator interested on one side in network infrastructures and technological activism, and on the other in curatorial and artistic research about the framework condition in which artistic practice is presented and transmitted to the audience. His current topics of research are the internet sustainability and environmental impact of technologies, digital greenwashing practices and platform capitalism. He is a part of the artist collective qujOchÖ, he collaborates with the sound art gallery bb15, and he works with Servus.at, an association dealing with open source internet infrastructure and online art and culture. He organizes the community festival AMRO (Art Meets Radical Openness).

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<https://core.servus.at>

<https://radical-openness.org>

<https://qujochoe.org>

At the Tangible Cloud second session, you presented different corporate campaigns from tech companies, that you pointed out as part of greenwashing strategies. Could you please start by defining what *greenwashing* is?

In a nutshell, *greenwashing* describes the action of someone that enhances their own public image through unproven or misleading claims about themselves doing something good for the environment. It can be a company that advertises its products as being designed with particular care for their environmental impact, but at the same time is investing money in polluting activities, doing big claims for little improvements, or even completely made-up marketing strategies with no actual ground. As a rule of thumb, if someone puts more energy into communicating their own goodness rather than trying to avoid climate collapse, this can fall under the umbrella of greenwashing.

Nevertheless, such a definition is quite difficult to apply, especially considering how product marketing works now. The rising interconnection between products, branding and customer experience, alongside the increasing genuine interest and preoccupations with climate issues, ended up creating space to be occupied with environmental-friendly marketing. A whole economical sector developed to manage carbon compensations, tree planting, clickbait campaigns and marketing based on the rising awareness of the few who never heard of the need to protect nature via consumerism. All of this can no longer be sharply divided in a binary logic of “legit” and “greenwashed”, we should find finer tools to orient ourselves.

In your opinion, why does the imagery of the (fluffy) cloud support greenwashing?

I see the core of it in the overlap between the immateriality of the internet and its being backed up by hyper material, dense and energetically heavy infrastructures. The image of the cloud is much more efficient than the responsibility of interfaces to make the server processes invisible. The cloud is namely present since early network schematics of the internet as an abstract representation of whatever the machines connect to. This abstraction is for me the tool that generates the space for greenwashing, concealing “whatever else” any machine we are talking about is connected to, as well as the ener-

getic or material need of this whatever else. We already grow up with the conviction that “digital” is only electricity, so it must be less impacting than, let’s say, paper. This is the basis that convinces us to use a convenient online service to transfer files across devices, instead of looking for an inconvenient USB cable. The fluffiness of the cloud not only embraces all the files traveling from my living room to a server in Kentucky and back, but also lets us accept that these private data “accidentally” become raw data where some ML are trained onto. When the fluffy comfort of the interface merges with the digital immateriality of the cloud, someone gets an advantage of that.

Pornhub, a leading porn video platform, launched a marketing campaign a few years ago called “Dirtiest Porn Ever”¹, supposed to raise funds to help clean the oceans. Could you please tell us more about this campaign and the greenwashing strategy underlying it? To what concrete actions did it lead?

Pornhub is known to perform since years very creative corporate responsibility campaigns which aim at rising awareness on topics such as breast or testicle cancer, but sometimes also launch some funny environmentally friendly ones. I went into the details in this article², but already at first sight the structure of campaigns like the “Dirtiest Porn Ever” appears quite straightforward: in this campaign, a donation to an NGO is activated every online view of a video on demand with two porn actors having intercourse on a polluted beach. According to the campaign organizers, the spot hit allegedly several news outlets, reaching many viewers and activating therefore many donations, as well as the gratitude of Pornhub and the environment. Albeit not many details were given on how much it was effectively donated with all these campaigns—making this look a bit suspicious—the interesting aspect is the very specific language shared among all the corporate responsibility campaigns. The Dirtiest Porn Ever and all the other Pornhub campaigns are built on a very specific marketing language based on half-winking jokes that consistently propose an image of Pornhub as a progressive pornographic company that wants to liberate adult video from its taboos and controversies. And all this ends up occupying the news space, possibly washing up the public perception by diluting the accuses of Pornhub of not doing enough to avoid non-consensual or underage sex videos being distributed on the platform.

Concretely on the campaign strategy, it is interesting to notice how many are built around the contemporary logic of clickbait activism adopted also by many other companies. They would ask each user to contribute through a little action to a wider scope, such as collectively liking an image with an environmental message on Instagram or using a specific browser to perform their online queries, to activate the planting of some hundred trees. This does not polish the environmentally friendliness of a brand, they become one of the functions embedded in the logic of green e-consumerism.

Talking about the website *sustainability.google*³ developed by Google to detail their sustainability strategy and how users could contribute to it, you used an expression that I find very interesting. You said that this website “won’t help you consume well, but it will help you feel better”. It seems to be a recurring pattern in green advertising campaigns to make consumers feel good about themselves morally, by giving them the illusion of activism through consumption. What do you think of this use of morals as a selling argument?

It is quite difficult to talk about the use of morals without being oneself moralist and out of time. I recall here a sentence I think I heard from the Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller—pardon my approximation here. By talking about his theory of “Interpassivity”, Pfaller explained that when we think “someone might be offended” by something or “someone might think”, we create a virtual, shared image of an abstract person to outsource a certain degree of stupidity too. In the end, it does not matter whether that poor person exists or not, but this culturally impacts how we think about some topics. In this context, I don’t think environmental moralism is directly linked to someone buying one specific object because they think it is the only way to help the environment. But green advertisements and their language contribute to an image of the “poor nature” that can be saved through tiny little actions of every one of us. I think the actual value is in this cultural image, whose manifestations end up obscuring the absurdity of doing our online research on a platform that promises trees planted or sending all our heavy digital data over the immaterial cloud because it does not cost much for the planet. In this sight, the proposal of *fapping* [masturbating] together with a porn video shot on a polluted beach to save the ocean is so on point that sometimes I see it as the best greenwashing

critique for a long time.

In your conference, you talked about how in the servers/hosting business, there’s “an overlap between optimization and sustainably”. Optimization of energy resources is implemented to reduce costs but is now often presented by companies as an effort towards sustainability. Amazon, which has “the same energy consumption as Finland”, also used it “to push for server centralization”. They claim that self-hosting (which you personally do) is more energy-consuming, and therefore, would be worst for the planet. Is centralization actually better for the environment? And if it is, does that make it desirable?

In any discussion about sustainability, I think it is really important to define what are the terms of comparison. If we look only at energy consumption and optimization, having an own old server infrastructure like the one of the network initiative where I work, Servus.at, is for sure not very energy efficient. Scale matters indeed in these engineering calculations. We should not forget that energy efficiency is not the only value that contributes to the idea of sustainability.

Some machines in the Servus data center are almost ten years old and yet still host services used by the art scene, saving on e-waste with a slower pace of hardware upgrade. Moreover, if you cannot scale up infinitely the amount of machines, you have to scale down the wishes to the bare bones, negotiating what is necessary and possible with these machines. In the end, this minimalist approach resonates with many ideas circulating in the communities developing the discourse of permacomputing, which are about imagining a systemically low-tech and low-energy impactful ICT.

My critique of Amazon is indeed about their lack of systemic view and minimalism in data usage. In their communication about sustainable clouds, Amazon strips away all the complexity of what it means to host sustainably, reducing the matter only to how much CO² is emitted per amount of data processed. In these terms, it is obvious that building large centralized systems works better, especially when the ideology of constant connectivity, data-heavy transfers and extra-high content quality persist. These need huge, super-optimized data processing facilities that only such corporations can offer. But all of this is far away from being good for the environment.

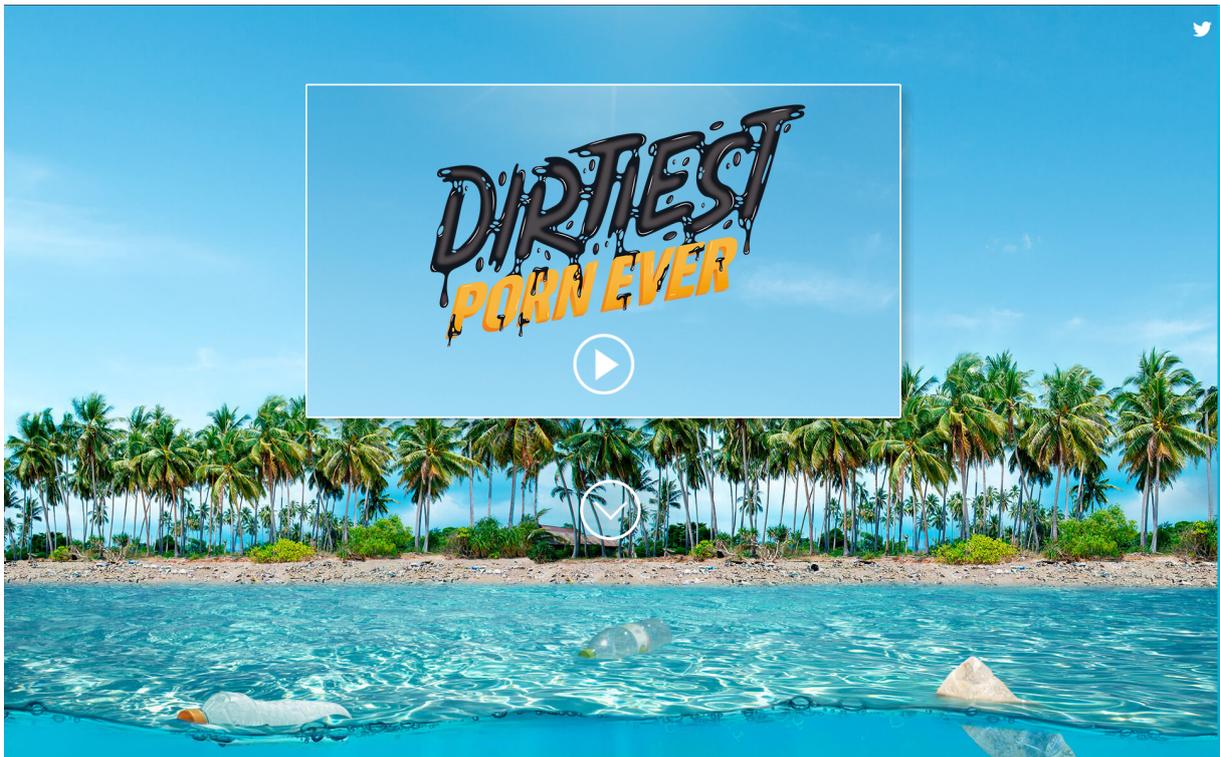
If we want to impact less nature we should in-

stead aim to cut energy usage and the constant technological upgrade necessary to the current cloud. We should criticize the ideology of the fluffy cloud at its base, keeping in mind that optimization should not be the only value to justify the impact of centralized systems in comparison to decentralized ones. Instead, we should look for a wider concept of sustainability for the infrastructure, and boycotting systems that generate wealth by harming the individual well-being and community economies, which is something at the core of Amazon's action and is backed up by the profits by the AWS clouds.

¹ See: <https://pornhub.com/cares/dirtiest-porn>

² <https://versorgerin.stwst.at/artikel/sep-3-2020-1530/»do-yourself-good-good-planet«>

³ <https://sustainability.google>



Dirtiest Porn Ever, Pornhub, 2019

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