Sonja Bettel

Welcome to the 21st Century

Ten years ago, as the 20th century inexorably neared its end, we looked to the future eagerly and even with a bit of excited anticipation. Would we soon be constructing colonies on Mars? Would clones be walking among us shortly? Would cars traveling superhighways be integrated into a navigation system that automatically delivers them to programmed destinations? Would functional food offer individually customized health care? Ten years later, who still recalls that the magic number 2000 was once synonymous with the very distant future—indeed, with science fiction. It seems like it's been such a long time now that half the people you see on the street are using wireless mobile devices to communicate with each other all the time and everywhere; that cars are better informed about the traffic situation than we motorists are, though we still do the driving ourselves; that we're able to design objects at one location and, by the push of a button, produce them at another, though teleportation remains a dream (or a nightmare); that human beings can live for weeks or months in outer space, though a malfunctioning toilette is the cause of a major crisis. Now, we're just beginning to truly grasp the challenges we're actually confronted by here in the 21st century.

That mankind is capable of bringing about climate change has been suspected, disputed and discussed for decades and finally accepted in recent years, but it's taken until this day for us to realize that the climate change has already taken place. Now, we're putting the Hollywood films back on the shelf and heading off in search of real solutions. What can we do to slow down climate change? How can we adjust to it? Who will be most severely affected?

Solar energy, wind power and biogas aren't inventions of the 21st century; pioneers got started in these directions more than 20 years ago. But now, in light of depleted petroleum and natural gas reserves and rising prices for them, there's increasing pressure to subsidize and increase research on renewable energy sources. Or could it be that atomic energy is indeed the solution to our problems?

Foodstuffs with additives and big promises fill the shelves of the industrialized world's supermarkets, but lately more and more people can't even afford the bare necessities because the prices are rising so rapidly. The way to the supermarket or to the marketplace has turned into a short course in international economics and global interrelationships. Prices are increasing because storms and droughts—among the causes of which are climate change—have ruined harvests; they're increasing because acreage is being used for the production of agro-fuels which means that less food is being grown; they're increasing because agricultural products—for all these reasons and as an upshot of global financial dealings—have become objects of speculation. Rising prices for foodstuffs, in turn, aggravate discontent with the current economic system, and does so not only among so-called antiglobalists but among establishment business experts too. Microcredits, social markets, regional currencies and fair trade are purportedly not just a band-aid covering over society's wounds but a new leg or even a new heart for the ailing organism.

Basically, we already knew 10, 20 or 30 years ago which issues we'd be facing in the 21st century. Many of these problems aren't even new; they're just manifesting themselves in different ways and much more clearly now. What has indeed changed, however, is the fact that we can no longer claim today that we're unaware of what's going on elsewhere on this planet. Information

and communications technologies—above all the Internet and mobile telecommunications – have made it possible for us to access gargantuan quantities of data, images, videos, sounds, information, news and opinion from all over the world. The Internet hasn't exactly changed the world, but it has changed the way we get our impressions of the world and how we react to them. The Internet doesn't prevent warfare, starvation, nuclear accidents or environmental pollution. Nevertheless, wherever things like this do happen, it's highly probable that people are there documenting what transpires in images, sounds and printed words, and informing the world about it. That's how we learn of demonstrations in Tibet, a tsunami in Indonesia and a hurricane in New Orleans, stranded refugees in Lampedusa and garbage collection campaigns in the Himalayas.

We are made aware that the entire world is inhabited by human beings who have basically the same dreams, wishes and needs that we do. We learn that, all over the world, there are people who have good ideas, are able to solve problems, and would like to impart their knowledge to others. We recognize that we can get connected to human beings who live someplace else on this planet, that we can learn from each other and jointly solve problems. The developers of free software, the authors of the Wikipedia online encyclopedia, the colonizers of Google Earth, the staff members of One Laptop per Child as well as countless other digital communities and colleagues collaborating via digital tools show how powerful information and communications technologies have become and how much can be accomplished by taking many tiny steps. Much-criticized globalization reveals its positive side here.

In 1962, Canadian communications researcher and media theoretician Marshall McLuhan foresaw that electronic media would transform the world into a "global village." Now, that global village has itself turned into a paradox. On one hand, we're able to obtain so much information from and about people living thousands of kilometers away that it's as if they were our neighbors. In this sense, the world does indeed seem like a village in which everybody knows everybody else. On the other hand, we are utterly overwhelmed by life in a village with a population of over six billion. Lots of our new "neighbors" would like nothing more than to come and move in now that they're able to see from a distance how good we have it here. And, at this point, our reaction is to bar the door, seal the borders and keep this scary world at bay.

This feeling that things have gotten out of hand and reached the point of a threat is further intensified by the prevalence of surveillance. Just like in a village where every step one takes can be scrutinized by other villagers, every move in the "global villages" can be electronically registered and evaluated. But the "observers" are no longer the folks next door; they're anonymous police operatives, espionage agencies and global corporations. Is the Information Revolution now devouring its children? Will we react with refusal and withdrawal into a world of anti-digital Biedermeier modesty? Or will we learn to use these communications and information technologies without having to surrender our civil rights in the bargain?

In Jules Verne's day, travel was an adventure whose outcome was uncertain. Today, we no longer have to board a steam-locomotive-driven train, fly in a hot-air balloon or ride on the back of an elephant to discover the world. We can access information channels on land, at sea and in the air as a means of encountering people and places during the course of a virtual journey. But it's still an adventure.