

DAVOSER ZEITUNG

DZ Di Tafaasari – ünschi Ziitig

«Hellvetia»: erstes
Theater mit Kultur-
platz-Beteiligung

Seite **5**

Eine Schmittner
Dorfikone: Die «Soga»
braucht Geld

Seiten **12/13**

Coverfestival Davos:
Die Vorfreude
ist riesig

Seiten **16/17**

Curling: Saison-
Abschluss
gebührend gefeiert

Seite **19**



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New Institute

AI research soon to be
done at Villa Fontana

Page **3**



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Pascal Kaufmann (left) and Philipp Wilhelm are pleased about the pioneering collaboration. Image: ad

Take away the fear

When it comes to robotics and artificial intelligence (AI), many people may have reservations about the topics. Last Thursday's event «The robot - our friend and helper» was an attempt to dispel the skepticism towards the new technologies.

Andri Dürst

That fact that even computer specialists are not always in control of the technology could be directly experienced by the audience in the auditorium of the Bünda school building last week. Apart from the lighting, none of the technical equipment in the hall was working as it should. Neither the microphones could be used nor the images from the beamer flickered on the screen. Thanks to the efforts of the municipality's IT team, however, these problems were soon rectified and the event - which was attended, among others, by Cantonal President Marcus Caduff and the ETH President's Chief of Staff, Jürg Brunnschweiler, was also present.

The evening was moderated not by a machine, but by a genuine Davos native. Adrian Hoffmann, who grew up in Davos and is studying computer science at the ETH, welcomed to the stage a number of connoisseurs from his branch of science. Before the audience was taken into the world of science and technology, Hoffmann interviewed Governor Philip Wilhelm. He said that the debate about AI

should also take place in Davos - the place where important decisions and discussions in the fields of medicine, global politics and scientific research have already been held in the past. He was also referring to the planned «Lab 42» (see page 3).

Practical examples as illustration

A total of seven speakers stood on the stage to try to bring AI research closer to the audience. Katja Bärenfaller, group leader at the SIAF, provided a vivid example. She showed how attempts were made during the corona pandemic to predict the course of the disease in people suspected of being infected. However, it quickly became clear that this challenge could not simply feed data into a machine and have it spit out a perfect result. «We had to keep readjusting the algorithms used,» Bärenfaller explained.

AI could soon benefit us in completely different areas as well. Andreas Bitzer from the Graubünden University of Applied Sciences presented one of their lighthouse projects. In the future, AI will take over important functions in mountain rescue operations. Currently, a lot of synchronization is required between the helicopter pilot and the rescuer during a rescue. At one time, AI is supposed to take over this alignment. The new technologies are therefore in no way intended to hinder people or make them subservient. Bitzer himself put it this way: «We should put people and our zest for life in the foreground».

Davos is richer by one branch of research

When a foundation finds that Davos is the right place to locate itself and its researchers, then it is a welcome announcement. This was exactly the news that Governor Philipp Wilhelm and «Mindfire» founder Pascal Kaufmann were able to announce last week.

Andri Dürst

«Mindfire» is no stranger to Davos. The foundation came to the Landwasser valley back in 2018 and held its «Mission 1» in what was then the «Intercontinental» hotel. Over six days, around 50 thought leaders selected from a pool of thousands gathered. The goal was to lay the foundation for a new understanding of how human intelligence works and the attempt to map it technically.

Mission 2 also successful

At that time, Valérie Favre Accola was still a small district administrator and came into contact with «Mindfire» for the first time. In the meantime, she has become head of regional development. In her new role, she brought the envisioned «Mission 2» back into play. The goal was to establish a permanent relationship between Davos and «Mindfire». Together with Wilhelm, Favre Accola participated in so-called «Quests». Various teams from the research branch participated in virtual sessions.

The commitment of the two Davos politicians now seems to be bearing fruit. As the Governor reported last Thursday at an information event (see page 2), the Small District Council recently decided to support the foundation with start-up funding so that it can establish itself in Davos. A spatial solution has also been found: On July 1st, «Lab 42» will start operating its new base on Obere Strasse in Villa Fontana - owned by the Swiss Research Institute for High Mountain Climate and Medicine (SFI). «It's a perfect fit there,» the Governor is pleased to say.

Continuing the strategy

Government President Marcus Caduff, who was also present on the evening of the announcement, is also pleased about the addition to the Davos research family: «Lab 42» fits in with our strategy of continuing to develop Davos as a city of knowledge. We have already taken a step in this direction with the CERC. Caduff considers it positive that something new is being added to the traditional natural sciences. «It's a very good fit. Artificial intelligence (AI) has a lot to do with data, and the traditional research institutes also collect a lot of data. Therefore, this is a good complement.»

AI research should not serve the power struggle

The head behind «Mindfire,» Pascal Kaufmann, is considered an AI pioneer. The neuroscientist wants to drive

the development of research in the country. Because, he said during his presentation on Thursday, «Switzerland is an AI nation; we have been number 1 for years. But given the competition between the US and China, the question is whether we have a chance on the international stage.» His main concern is to build AI by people for people and thus understand the principle of intelligence. «We need to drive development not against each other, but with each other». With «Lab 42», therefore, the largest laboratory for AI was created - which, however, did not happen in physical space, but in virtual space.

In the context of the aforementioned «Mission 2», they then asked themselves where they wanted to settle. «Davos is great for a number of reasons,» emphasizes Kaufmann. He brings up the existing city of knowledge, but he also has words of praise for the responsible politicians: «With the governor and the regional developer, I met people who have 'drive'. The spirit of optimism on Thursday was palpable. Because the timing for the launch of the «Lab 42» in Davos is ideal, says the «Mindfire» founder. He compares the current situation with the time before the moon landing, when scientific excellence was achieved within a short period of time. To those who now wonder what the people of Davos have to gain from this, the «Mindfire» founder replies: «We develop technology for you!»



Organisatoren und Referenten des Abends (v.l.): Valérie Favre Accola, Andreas Bitzer, Alex Ilic, Melanie Zeilinger, Heiko Rölke, Pascal Kaufmann, Katja Bärenfaller, Stefan Papst, Adrian Hoffmann und Philipp Wilhelm.

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