

## Imagination

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*With maximum uncertain circumstances we kicked off the Christmas season. A hard lockdown just before winter set in, a few weeks in and around the house ahead of us, sometimes with a number of children. Family Christmas dinners that got cancelled, dreams of either a white or sunny Christmas that went up in smoke. After a demanding and increasingly chaotic 2020, we find ourselves at the beginning of a new year. A new story that we can write together. How do we create a hopeful start and story for 2021 from the main ingredients of 2020, which for so many of us have entirely lost their appeal?*

## Transparency and trust

We live in uncertain times. Not only uncertain because our world is increasingly complex and changeable, but also because we navigate in a complicated (digital) web of information and knowledge. The reliability of such information and knowledge is not always clear or easily verifiable. The lack of clarity on reliability finds its origin in a lack of transparency about the development of information on the one hand and the absence of clearly definable sources on the other hand. In our western societies, information and knowledge form the basis of our free choice to determine what each of us considers to be true. And when we cannot trust the building blocks underlying our choices, doubt starts to creep in. We start doubting ourselves, as well as others. The unreliability of information and knowledge in our current systems has by now started to trickle down to distrust in our mutual relationships and distrust in our institutions.

## Infocalyps

And with that, our ability to discern and interpret what is real is under severe attack today. Increasingly, real and virtual worlds are being mixed, with all the advantages and disadvantages this encompasses. The digital world and the algorithms underlying it make us end up in information bubbles. Information bubbles that lead to completely different individual perspectives on the world around us. Perspectives with which we identify, and hide behind, whether virtually or not. When the promise of the Internet sent more and more information and knowledge to an ever larger group of people worldwide, who would have thought that it would result in a Tower of Babel-like situation? Add to this the new phenomenon of 'infocalyps': a total undermining of the credibility of information. This, in combination with the aforementioned information bubbles, leads to growing polarization and the absence of common ground. And so we find ourselves at this moment in time, where the freedom that once formed a key design principle of the Internet, today predominantly generates an atmosphere of distrust. Both in the digital and non-digital world.

## 'Default by design'

Should we consider freedom an illusion? I believe not. The idea of freedom on the basis of which the Internet was developed constituted a positive and hopeful starting point. However, at the same time we can determine that the Internet as a system has been designed without taking into account our human shortcomings. The 'illusion' of the freedom that is fundamental to the Internet seems to be the absence of ethical principles that can overcome our human shortcomings in the design and use of the

Internet. Ethical principles and values that can be consciously 'baked' into algorithms and programs. That way, we can correct and modify technologies, that increasingly penetrate and mix with our daily lives, so as to allow for individualized approaches rather than bulk treatment. Have we really forgotten that software and technology are a means, and not an end in itself? They constitute resources that can and may be supportive of activities carried out by humans. After all, isn't the outcome of a numerical model as accurate or inaccurate as the correctness and completeness of the assumptions underlying the model? This means that we simply cannot and should not use software without adjustments for individual circumstances. These individual human circumstances colour the specific case. Something for which the algorithms often did not provide.

What has always rung true for systems in general, we are now experiencing first-hand for the system we call the Internet: without responsibility (for the whole), (individual) freedom is a dangerous concept. Now that we are starting to recognize that our governments worldwide have grossly neglected to take responsibility for a safe and reliable Internet, often under the header of 'more market', this gap has already willingly been filled by large global tech companies with individual interests. And thereby, what is considered 'true' or 'real' may soon be determined by a handful of companies, rooted in a strong neo-liberal culture. Unless we take back control. After all, doesn't each of us determine by his/her choices what is right and what we really deem to be of value?

### **Knowledge transfer**

Now that we are once more being severely restricted in freedoms that we have acquired over centuries, the uncertainty regarding both the present and the 'new normal' feels all the more frightening. After all, we feel we have no control over matters that are grand, far away and abstract. In addition, control on an individual level nowadays also slips away frequently due to continuous changes and adjustments externally imposed. How do we find a shared reality that can serve as a foundation for a new collective story? And what about that contemporary appearance of autonomy, which we like to hide behind so much when it comes to our individual realities? After all, over the past decades, the world has become so complex and rapidly changing that no one scientific field can provide a definitive and complete picture of reality. Let alone that a single person can know 'the truth'. Multidisciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches are becoming the norm rather than the exception, so how can we as individuals stay out of the trap of our 'autonomous thinking'? Autonomous thinking was an important step we made at the time of the Enlightenment: we moved away from a firm belief in and following a small group of authority figures and started to rely predominantly on our own reason and knowledge development. It has taken us to where we are today. But ultimately, knowledge is not created in isolation. Knowledge is created and shared together. More than anything else, it is our ability to cooperate and to co-create that underlies the success of our human history.

### **What is freedom?**

During the Enlightenment humanity took a big step in science and reason. We now find ourselves at the next crossroads. Our linear, rational thinking no longer offers a solution to and control of an ever more complex and changing reality around us.

And the enormous amount of information, services and goods that we experience in the world around us is often simply overwhelming. As a result, our individual feelings of uncertainty are increasing rapidly. Together with that enormous freedom outside of ourselves, our need to feel safe and secure increases. Would consciousness, and the associated ability to adapt, be able to save us? Our human consciousness that gives us the freedom to determine our response to events around us. In Victor Frankl's words, is 'the last of the human freedoms' perhaps indeed the last and most valuable thing left to us as humans when the world around us seems to be crumbling down? Can we take

consciousness as a guiding principle? A principle that relativizes and transcends information bubbles, infocapyps and experts who claim to know it all? After all, we are not enslaved to our brains, nor do we have to be slaves to algorithms that have us end up in different information bubbles. Our ability to develop and adjust our behavior and our perspective on the world is immense. That starts with consciousness. Our individual consciousness.

### **Chaos and radical cooperation**

In the past year, a part of humanity will probably have become somewhat more aware. Aware as a result of all the activities and habits that fell away or that needed adjusting. And perhaps also more aware of personal preferences through activities not previously undertaken. Aware because of what remains after the loss of a loved one, or awareness around how good most people are as a result of loving gestures from friends and neighbors. Now that we have travelled this far individually, can we consciously create a new collective awareness together? A collective consciousness regarding the existence of multiple realities, in which people represent the different colors of the rainbow and also have different perspectives on these colors. Can we attempt to embrace these multiple realities as a valuable chaotic pallet of possibilities? A pallet that in all its diversity contains the building blocks for the realization of a beautiful new order? Just as the chaos of the COVID-19 crisis gave rise to new behaviour, so too is the chaos created by the current information bubbles the prelude to a new order. However, before a new order, a new system, can arise, chaos and the dismantling of the old order is needed simultaneously. And so, the chaos in today's world truly constitutes the breeding ground for the new. Instead of losing ourselves in and between these different realities inherent to these chaotic times, we can begin building the new order by recognizing, appreciating and embracing pluralism. And, can we search for and investigate shared values that could form a foundation for a new reality. After a year of distance, loneliness and major change, can we perhaps conclude that the value of our shared humanity – and the inherent uncertainty to being human – is so overarching that it may just allow us to transcend our differences in appearance, supposed truths and opinions? Did we not recognize and acknowledge one another in our shared humanness, when during the first lockdown the fear, worry and uncertainty were rampant? When no one knew what to do, when to do it and how to do it? Exactly then did we collectively take responsibility to write a new story. A new story that started to emerge just when during that crisis our old story proved wholly insufficient? The old narrative that had shown cracks for some time now, which has become painfully obvious due to the COVID-19 crisis. After all, we have seen the consequences of freedom without responsibility from 'the market', the various government agencies and institutions operating on the basis of distrust instead of trust, increasing social inequality and poverty within our societies and a deeply rooted efficiency thinking within all centralized systems.

Besides this, there is this new story that has already presented itself to many of us individually. A story of more balance with nature, ourselves and each other. A story of compassion, trust and connection. A story of cooperation, dialogue and a focus on the human dimension. A new story that is both ancient and new, and that many of us recognized, but that unfortunately had not yet firmly rooted itself in our current western societies. As a result, many of us quickly fell back into our old habits as the prevailing structure mainly continued to support and even stimulate that old behavior. Nevertheless, through the current cracks in the old story and the old structures, the light now slowly begins to penetrate.

### **The power of imagination**

So we can ask ourselves: what infrastructure should be centrally organized to allow for an inclusive, just and above all regenerative society? How many laws and regulations are really needed? How much freedom and responsibility do we attribute to commercial business? And the same for citizens and

local authorities? What world do we wish to inhabit when it comes to matters such as our public spaces, energy and food supply, health care and education? How do we create equitable institutions and systems where citizens are trusted instead of distrusted, and how do we ensure health care where prevention of diseases is the rule instead of the exception? Do we embrace the current uncertainty and inevitable chaos, in order to co-create new systems from there? Systems that are inclusive instead of exclusive. Systems that offer a multitude of perspectives. Systems that spring from the power of our imagination. From the imagination that a more beautiful world is possible. What we may have underestimated so far may just be the power of our imagination. Imagination, which makes us realize that our systems were once conceptualized by people, and can now also be dismantled and rewritten by humans. Imagination that makes us feel, see, hear and be what a world looks like where everyone is welcome.

All of the above questions are being pondered and investigated by many loving critical thinkers and changemakers, and many wonderful solutions and stories are already available. So, I wonder if at the beginning of 2021 we can join forces and write grand and compelling 'the Netherlands 2030' and 'the world 2030' stories together. Let's write them, draw them, paint them and turn the stories into dance and music. Stories that offers perspective and hope, and stories that can reach, inspire and mobilize people within all layers of our society. Let's expose and dismantle what no longer works, and identify the building blocks for a regenerative future. So that we are reminded of and start working together consciously towards a world that we want to live in!