

**THINGS ARE
GETTING
COMPLICATED
– HURRAY!**

**Dealing with the complexity
of the future**

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ACCEPT COMPLEXITY

**or: how to start making
real choices**

Buy this car. Vote for that political party. Choose this degree. Read that newspaper. Watch this channel. Drink that brand of coffee. Support this charity. Choose that insurance policy. Go to this country on holiday. Get that apartment. See this movie. Sign up for that course. Go to this festival. Download that app. And so on, and so forth. Modern (digital) life in a capitalist society is the equivalent of being exposed to a constant onslaught of messages that promise to improve your life somehow. The fact that these messages are powerful, get inside your head and often take up more of your mental real estate than you would like makes perfect sense. The amount of knowledge, manpower and refined tactics being used to push you towards certain choices has most likely never before been this big, throughout all of human history. The number of people who earn their daily bread doing this, to some degree or other (marketing, PR, commercials and awareness raising), has never been this big. And that number is still constantly on the rise. Regardless of the question of what this growth tells us about the phase that capitalism is currently in (is the choice for a particular product becoming more important than the product itself?), the deeper promise underlying all of these messages is that they'll release you from the constant pressure of having to think about these things, if just for a moment. If you choose this car, then just for a little while, you won't have to think about what car you want to drive (after all, you're already driving that car). If you choose this newspaper, then just for a little while, you won't have to think about what the best newspaper would be (you're already subscribed to it, thank goodness!). if you choose this app, then just for a

little while, you won't have to think about which app would be best to use (because you're already using it). The thing that all of these commercial messages therefore have in common is the notion that the product or service being advertised will make your life easier, at least for a time.

Every commercial is ultimately based on a promise of simplicity, of clarity, of the solution you've been longing for. But how realistic is that notion, really – that making that single choice for a particular product or service will actually make your life easier? Apart from the fact that every new product or service you choose will demand another small measure of your attention in and of itself and will need to be maintained, you would do well to wonder about why you continue to be susceptible to that lure of simplification. Let's do a little thought experiment. Imagine accepting that life, and particularly modern life right now and throughout the rest of the twenty-first century, will only ever get more complicated. Wouldn't that eliminate the pressure you feel to keep making these choices every day? To give in to temptations, scan headlines for that perfect fix, only to increase your already high stress levels in an ultimately unfulfilling way?

That is why our main proposition in this book is for you to accept that things are complex, and will continue to become even more complex. As such, that status of being at least partially ignorant is an inescapable one in our digital world, which sees the addition of a truly astounding amount of new data and knowledge every single day. Ground-breaking inventions that are the equivalent of the wheel and the steam engine are developed every day, and they're usually so state-of-the-art that only a fraction of the people in the world stand a chance of fathoming how they work. The overwhelming majority of knowable facts in our modern-day society will never be known by you personally.

It's as simple as that.

It's only when you detach from the headlines and the onslaught of tempting messages that you can create the necessary space and clarity to be able to make real choices for yourself, and answer the following, all-important question: given that things are only going to get more complex and that I am doomed to know next to nothing about an ever increasing number of topics, what is the one topic for which I do not want to just stand idly by? What is the one topic that I want to spend my time on, every single day?

What is the one topic for which I am willing to welcome the full complexity, and try to keep up with the latest developments, so that my opinion on at least that one topic will be at least somewhat relevant?

BEAT THE ALGORITHMS

**or: how to resist data
science and avoid narrowing
your perspective**

Apart from the fact that you are constantly exposed to tempting messages that promise to make your life easier, there is a range of relatively young, powerful widespread phenomena, like apps and their respective algorithms, that are even more adamant about influencing you – or trying to anyway. They not only tempt you - they go so far as to force your hand (or try to pave the way for such forcing to become possible). As soon as companies get access to your personal data and are thus able to discover your personal preferences, the places you like to go, the products you buy, your tastes in music or books, etc., you start to be targeted by a veritable siege of apps and algorithms. It is all well and good for us to say that these digital tools are negative, and draw all sorts of metaphorical comparisons and warn you that your sense of individuality is being torn to shreds, but the relevant tech companies would vehemently deny any such allegations. They'll maintain that apps and algorithms do the exact opposite – they help you! Many tech companies go even further. They dare to pretend that they're not only helping you do things like making the right choices or maintaining a healthy lifestyle, but that their apps and algorithms can in fact enable you to create a better version of yourself. They're not just helpful little aids, which would still be relatively innocuous – they are the perfect guide for you to use to become 'your best self'.

The way we're framing the notion now – apps and algorithms as the perfect guide for you to use to become 'your best self' – might sound so out-there that you're disinclined to believe it. But when we go step

by step and trace the very train of thoughts that the big tech companies in Silicon Valley use every single day to develop new products, and examine the idealism, genuine or otherwise, with which the young people in those companies work tirelessly in the belief that they are helping their users improve their lives and making the world a fundamentally better place, you'll soon realise that it's not so out-there at all – or, alternately, that it is very out-there, but nonetheless also makes perfect sense! What could be bad or wrong about an activity tracker that reminds you that you have, oh, say, 2496 more steps to take today to reach an arbitrary basic level of health and fitness? That's a neat thing to have, no? It undoubtedly works to your advantage, helping you stay fit and healthy as long as possible, and helping you to maximise the time you're given on this earth. In short, it is in fact a very logical conclusion that an activity tracker is your best friend – and on top of that, your ever-dutiful trustworthy doctor or doctor's assistant, serving in the absence of your GP, going through the trouble of letting you know that there's 2496 more steps to go before you can rest assured of your health status once more.

It's not very odd to think you're an idealistic altruist when working on an app like that, creating millions of virtual doctor's assistants that will be helping millions of people stay on top of their health.

There are many people nowadays who do indeed get right up to go for a walk consisting of (at the bare minimum) the prescribed number of steps as soon as their activity tracker tells them to. On the one hand, these people are powerless victims to their activity trackers, immediately obeying their commands, but on the other hand, they often rake in others' admiration and esteem due to their discipline and commitment to staying healthy. After all, how many people start well-intentioned life changes like that, only to give up after their initial enthusiasm has worn off?

An underlying question to wonder about is whether the supposed discipline and commitment are admirable traits inherent to the one

obeying the activity tracker, or whether they are merely the temporary consequence of their wearing said activity tracker and would evaporate in a moment's notice if the person were to de-install the app. It's good to ask these questions and be aware of the flip side of digital technology, but it's also important to acknowledge that these questions are inherently unanswerable. Not a single scientist has ever been able to solve the age-old nature/nurture debate, dealing with the question of which behaviours are 'inherently yours', and which are the result of stimuli in your environment and are therefore not 'inherently yours'.

There is simply no way to know.

How peculiar, and perhaps telling, then, that many tech companies are happy to quickly move past the complexity of this question and feel confident that they can in fact solve it. Many social media platforms, including Twitter, pretend to know you better than you know yourself, based on the posts you make, the way you respond to other posts, etc. (in short, based on data). How realistic on the one hand, or absurd on the other hand, is that pretence, really? As though they are able to see 'who you are', what 'is totally your thing' and 'really isn't like you at all', from a distance. It's an absurd pretence, indeed, and it lines up with that other, perhaps even more absurd pretence: that tech companies aren't just there to help, but are in fact able to help you become 'your best self'. Does that still fall in the category of idealism? Or does it shift over towards pitiful overestimation of their abilities – not to mention a questionable conqueror's mentality, operating out of immense offices to limit our personal freedom. Regardless of the answer, we feel that it is more important to be asking the question, to promote awareness of the fact that apps and algorithms are deeply ambiguous, both aiding us and limiting us, all the while being ostensibly innocuous and easy to use.

For some more food for thought on this topic, here are two examples of such limitations, subtle though they may be.

Example 1: Apps like Google Maps only consider one route: the fastest one. Say you're exiting the train station on a bright, sunny day; you might want to enjoy the weather by taking a detour along the canal or through the park, but Google Maps won't offer you that option. Before you know it, you're following the app's orders no matter the circumstances, even when the weather's nice, and you're effectively robbing yourself of a nice dose of sunshine, which can give you such an energy boost. If you make a habit of robbing yourself of these small joys and the resulting energy boosts, you might well be putting yourself on track for a burn-out somewhere down the line.

Example 2: The number of apps and algorithms that try to keep you up to date on the best music, books, movies and concerts, using current or historical lists, is staggering, and at first glance these seem like helpful tools for optimal entertainment. But how much do you really ever 'know' or 'see' if you're letting these kinds of lists determine your choices in life? To use sports terminology, how can you ever understand or even begin to understand the game (i.e. the world), if you're just looking at the goals being scored and never get to see the lead-up and the plays that resulted in those goals?

This isn't to suggest that apps and algorithms are inherently reprehensible. Instead, we recommend becoming aware of their true nature, useful and limiting in often equal measure. Even though apps and algorithms may try their best to feign genuine interest in who you are as a person, such as by asking for your opinion, they are not really interested in your complexity.

Quite the contrary – their aim is to reduce you from a person to a pattern, a commodity much more valuable to advertisers. In short, what often looks like an invitation to engage in dialogue and may even lead to an interesting conversation is in fact merely an exercise intended to simplify you and quantify you. And we haven't even begun to discuss tech companies' main motivation for wanting to fit you in the confines of a mould... Money, of course! If they are able

to provide third parties with a pattern of you based on the posts or content you produce, and are thus able to predict what you would want and would buy or what your heart's desires are, there's real money to be made there.

So make sure to maintain a healthy distance from (commercial) apps and algorithms. Be critical and reserved, so that you remain in charge of yourself. If you don't and give these technologies too much leeway, they'll soon get in your head and start functioning like a hyper-modern, frenzied clock, telling you what to do and when to do it. This draws you into a tunnel – an oversimplified, overclarified, but oppressive reality – of which the most logical conclusion may indeed be chronic exhaustion.

Simplicity isn't always healthy. In fact, it usually isn't.

CONCENTRATE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

**or: how to be effective and
relevant in an overcrowded
information landscape**

Similar to the endless daily stream of tempting messages coming at you, there is also that continuous temptation to participate in all sorts of conversations and discussions, whether digitally or face to face. Sitting out with the excuse that 'the topic is too complex' or 'I don't know enough about it, sorry' won't win you any popularity points. Friends, family and co-workers are longing for you to send them a signal indicating that what they feel is important is also considered important by you. It's not even that they want you to say something that they'll agree with. First and foremost, contributing to the conversation will show them that you too have given a particular topic some thought. This way, they receive confirmation that they are not alone in doing so. This function, mutual confirmation of having given something some thought, that social dimension of a conversation (cancelling out each other's loneliness) forms the core of almost any voluntary conversation. More so than the content of the conversation or the conclusion that is drawn, the participants care about the fact that the conversation was even had in the first place. It creates a sense of shared warmth, even if you disagree with each other vehemently!

So many conversations are primarily about that sense of shared warmth, as opposed to about the content. This means that they won't necessarily get you anywhere. Does that mean they're a waste of time?

The answer is simple – no, they're not a waste of time. Conversations and discussions can be very educational and enjoyable, and yes, warm too, and all human beings have a need for warmth.

It gives you energy – it gives you drive to keep doing what you're doing. However, it is very useful to be aware of the difference between different types of conversations and interactions, and the fact that some are geared towards confirming or reinforcing the mutual bond between people, whereas others are geared towards content and solving a particular issue. As a result of the rise of social media and the meteoric increase in the number of ways there are to have a conversation, it's a good idea to keep asking yourself what kind of conversation you're having. What is the purpose of the conversation? What are you getting from it?

Admittedly, being able to recognise and identify the type of conversation you're having is another one of those things that has gotten more difficult in our modern, online society. Not too long ago, a political party or newspaper would try to tell you what's what. They tried to keep up appearances of objectivity no matter what and explain to you how you should feel about certain matters, to enable certain issues to be solved. Political parties and newspapers functioned as transmitters, one-way loudspeakers, so to speak: from a fixed location, they would 'spread the truth' amongst the people, without the people responding, apart from a few letters here and there. That one-sidedness has now become a thing of the past. Not just in social media; traditional media like national newspapers also want nothing more than to engage in conversation with their customers (i.e. readers). Although these entities used to operate out of hermetically sealed office buildings and feed the unquestioning public so-called objective facts and analysis, they are now extending themselves onto the streets, showing their best side and wanting to be friends with you. One could ask whether reading a newspaper has turned into a social meeting that involves a mutual search for shared warmth. Or is it still a functional phenomenon, with daily knowledge

transfers as its main objective? The answer, naturally, is that these two functions are bleeding into each other more than ever. There's that complexity again...

On the one hand, newspapers are investing more and more into editorial teams for fact-checking, to ensure that the information they publish is factually accurate. On the other hand, one of the country's largest newspapers is organising a luxury boat tour so as to really get to know its readers while enjoying a glass of wine together. In other words, newspapers are currently working on expanding both their informative and their recreational functions, and lift both to a new level. To make things more complicated, consider the fact that these two functions can also obstruct each other. To what extent will facts that sell well commercially and create a pleasant atmosphere on this boat tour and within the Marketing department be debunked by the fact checkers employed by the same newspaper, in an office just down the hall from Marketing?

If you really want to know what's what (and why wouldn't you?) and don't want to be distracted in the meantime by commercial attempts to be as well-liked by you as possible, it might make more sense to become part of a digital community without a profit motive, with members who have proven their competence over time, as opposed to picking up just any newspaper. Social motives will most likely play a role even in a digital society, and people might tell you things out of a desire to be liked by you, but the level of trust and involvement is usually higher than that within just any newspaper's website, news platform or social medium where you don't know who exactly is behind it. Initiatives like @The Correspondent are making good progress in establishing a digital-style brand of journalism, with particular journalists being available for discussion on particular cases, and featuring mutual knowledge sharing between authors and respondents. This type of journalism is also referred to as 'solution-oriented journalism', and is strictly speaking not just the success of a single chief editor or a single editorial team but that of

all members together. It is journalism as a collective think tank.

One useful lesson you could take from the complexity we outlined in this chapter is the fact that searching for answers in the online community is a continuous process, now more than ever. 'The truth', as a treasure to be found in a particular spot and then shown off to everyone you know like a trophy you've won, is more elusive than ever.

Is this increased elusiveness of 'the truth' bothersome? Annoying? Impractical? People who are attached to the idea of certainty will most likely answer 'yes' to all three (bothersome, annoying, and impractical!), but the only viable conclusion to draw when looking at the development of online society and the explosive growth of data streams these days is that 'the truth' is harder to find than ever and cannot be found in any one spot – at any given moment of any given day, new data may shed light on 'the truth'.

If you want to survive in this environment of complexity, and feel comfortable and well-adjusted while doing so, you have to start concentrating your knowledge and deciding which topics you want to stay up to date on and which you are willing to let fall by the wayside. This in turn determines which things you want to have substantive conversations and discussions on, and which things you merely communicate about with the aim of feeling nice and connected.

The more you're aware of the difference between the different types of conversations and their communication objectives, the more realistic your expectations of what a conversation can or cannot achieve will be, and the more effective you will be able to be, in both recreational and functional conversations. As a result, you will derive more joy from conversation.

Such an awareness of complexity actually makes communicating a lot less complex in the end.

CELEBRATE BOREDOM

**or: how lack of focus can
point you in the direction of
originality and real experiences**

One of the most frequently recurring items in lifestyle magazines and newspaper columns – the true yardsticks of zeitgeist if there ever were any – is how regrettable it is that good old-fashioned boredom and time-wasting is so hard in today's digital dynamic.

These articles propagate the phenomenon of boredom as something that is necessary, an essential opportunity to wind down or let off steam, a much-needed moment of peace and quiet – a moment of blessed emptiness to be embraced wholeheartedly.

Their efforts to put boredom back on the map can only be praised.

But consider this – are we not cheating the phenomenon of boredom by mainly seeing it as breaktime? Empty space in which nothing happens? As a matter of fact, isn't boredom the exact opposite? Is it not the moment in which the functional, goal-oriented, efficient side of you takes a step back and things around you start to come alive, or at least stop serving a single clear purpose, so that while nothing much is happening, there's actually a lot going on? After all, isn't one of the prerequisites of boredom a temporary severe lack of focus, causing it to be unclear which stimulus has which function? Causing you to be unclear as to what you're seeing and what is and isn't relevant? It is precisely during those confusing moments that interesting questions can arise. Why not allow yourself to fall into the confusion, and ask yourself or the world around you those interesting questions?

Particularly now that meaningful knowledge is trying to gain a decisive lead on meaningless knowledge, and is finding increasingly clever ways to get your attention via smartphones with the promise of providing you with the ability to make the difference, the value of meaningless knowledge (or at least, knowledge that does not seem to serve any immediate purpose), is at risk of going unacknowledged. This is a shame, because non-functional knowledge is precisely the kind of knowledge that forms the essential foundation of creative thinking and creative achievements. While the Internet started out as a chaotic free-for-all, a refuge for the anarchistically inclined, an endlessly complex and adventurous jungle to navigate, it has since become a highly branched network of highways spanning the world over, which take you where you want to go within seconds, but these highways have massive sound barriers that limit your view of your surroundings. Your chances of making a random turn somewhere have greatly diminished. Over time, the Internet has become more of an extension of who you already are as opposed to a tool towards whom you might become. In short, it is a hyper efficient distribution centre catering to your personal needs and preferences. Almost anything you might want to see or obtain can be seen or ordered in a half dozen clicks.

The Internet is an omnipresent reality in our modern-day world. Once you've realised that, the most urgent subsequent question would be the following: are you happy to have your choices be determined by the smooth highways of the Internet, subscribing to the illusion of simplicity that the Internet presents you with? In other words, do you mostly just get things from the Internet to make your life ostensibly better or easier? Or do you 'give back' to the Internet with the aim of enriching the network? Not to add more mileage of smooth, digital highway with further reduction of reality as a result, but to add side tracks and new turns – so that the Internet does not just grow in terms of efficiency and quick solutions for the mainstream, but also serves and offers options to those who do not fall within that mainstream.

Those who want to use the speed and power of the Internet for plans, dreams, future visions and experiments that serve no immediate economic purpose and of which the value and usefulness has not yet been determined.

In short, is your Internet usage merely consumptive, or also creative? Once again there is no hard divide between the two; almost everyone uses the Internet in both ways at least to some extent. Try finding someone who exhibits purely consumptive or purely creative behaviour online – you'll be hard-pressed trying to find them! Even bargain hunters who spend their days trying to find the specific restaurant that offers the best deal on that specific day and greedily reel in their prize, exhibiting obviously consumptive behaviour, might leave comments about the quality of the menu and service at said restaurant, adding something to the Internet (although we could debate the creative value of that addition...).

To get an idea of what happens when your Internet usage is predominantly consumptive, and you're thus at risk of slowly turning from a live human being into a bland copy of the search engine you depend on for even the most basic queries, let us cite Russian poet Kirill Medvedev. In his poem 'Europe', a monument against impending oversimplification, he conjures a comical, yet unsettling image of a team of young athletes listlessly waiting for their lay-over in Brest, near the border between Belarus and Poland:

*I'm riding the bus
with a group of athletes
from some provincial town
they're going to a competition in Milan;
our bus has stopped at the border,
and waits to go through customs.
what country are we entering? one of them asks me;
Poland, I say.
so that's what, the EU? he asks.*

*no, I say. Poland's not in the EU yet.
what other countries are we going through?
Germany, I say, Austria
he nods
Portugal, I lie; he nods again;
I could have said Greece, Syria, Ireland—he'd have
nodded.
oh, mighty athlete,
our bus will travel through Iceland,
we'll see sheep, deer,
muskoxen;
we'll see camels;
we'll see the early ice—
hills of not quite solid,
not yet formed
(they call it
'uncrystallised')
but very real, early ice;
we'll see the Alps—they'll be
to both sides of us—
there'll be some nice places to cool off;
we'll see the ruins of Thebes, and the remains
of mad Alexandria—
but we won't look at any of this;
instead we'll watch movies
on our disc players;
we've been watching movies the whole way from Moscow,
one was an American film in which it gradually became clear
that using the shampoo Head and Shoulders was the only way
to save yourself from the alien invaders
(at the end, it turns out the film has actually been
an epic shampoo commercial).*

At first glance, this poem might seem to be merely about young Russian athletes who've never been abroad and have a habit of

asking questions that would've been resolved with a quick Google search. But if you go beyond that surface layer, you'll see a group of young athletes who have, as a result of Google and their unshakeable faith that any knowledge can be retrieved online within a matter of seconds, completely lost all desire to actually acquire any (topographical) knowledge for themselves. The poem suggests that even if they were to look up which countries are in the European Union, they'd forget again in a matter of minutes. They're only interested so long as the knowledge serves a consumptive purpose, namely to find out how quickly they'll get to their destination, the site of the competition they're heading towards. This poem is so powerful due to its terrifying image of a generation growing up no longer wanting to source its information from reality (confusing and time-consuming as it is), instead choosing to surrender entirely to media (Internet, TV) as its primary source of information. The final portion of the poem, about the shampoo brand Head & Shoulders fighting 'alien monsters' re-emphasises the confusion that these athletes are subject to.

You could interpret this poem, 'Europe', as a self-satisfied ego trip by a worldly poet, judgmentally shaking his head at the younger generation of slavish media consumers. However, the poet's skilful words showcase not just the young people's far-reaching indifference, but also an unprecedented weakness: these disorientated athletes are the perfect victims to be misled by the ones in charge of the media. If you were to go into Google Maps and change the name of the country they're in into 'Albania', they'll blindly believe they're travelling through Albania, as they have zero knowledge of Albania and the kind of landscape that it would present. Their consumptive curiosity is limited to whether a given place is on their intended route. They've effectively been robbed of any and all tools that might enable them to check whether Google Maps is lying to them.

Some might say that this poem is an exaggeration, but others would say that it sounds suspiciously like the Internet generation's mind-

set towards reality, which could be summarised as follows: in the end, reality is just another screen, a random collection of bits and bytes that you can click away. To ensure that this extreme form of disorientation and indifference does not come to dominate, culminating in the terrifying prospect of it being the norm, it is important for governments to get involved in the architecture of the Internet and actively stimulate a healthy balance between consumptive and creative Internet usage. They should not shy away from imposing limitations on powerful tech companies, such as by implementing journalistic rules, strong privacy legislation, and a proper package of digital basic human rights. To contribute to this development, or even to collaborate on thinking about it, would mean a marvellous contribution to the future!

When governments are too shy or moderate in dealing with tech companies, said companies will use the space they've been left with to slither their tentacles even further and even more sneakily into our homes, to scope out our data even more greedily and then predict our desires and impulses even more accurately, only to respond to or satisfy them even more quickly. Before you know it, you're spending your whole life being 'occupied' by others without ever being able to figure out what boredom means, or how to think independently.

Is that what we're headed towards? Is that the shape that our mind-numbing future will take? It will come as no surprise, then, that depression was singled out as one of the biggest dangers to the world's economy in the future at the famous World Economic Forum in Davos.

Young voices in the tech industry, like CEO Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, are now slowly but surely (only after a range of big scandals, of course) becoming aware of the downsides of their revenue model, and are openly pointing governments to their duty of imposing boundaries and dictating what is and isn't allowed.

So that tech companies' desire to record our personal data is reined in on time, allowing private citizens to withdraw as needed, away from algorithms and hyperintelligent gadgets, and just spend time being wonderfully bored.

Boredom as the newest type of privilege, as a desirable medicine.

DON'T GET ON STAGE

**or: how only 'backstage parts'
will allow you to grow**

As part of traditional capitalism, of which we are now in the final days, vested institutions would raise citizens to behave responsibly, which generally meant, or at least came down to, outsourcing the various elements of your life, such as payment of your salary, funding for purchasing a house, accruing pension, to name a few minor (!) matters, to banks and pension funds. Once you've yielded these aspects of your life to said institutions, life ostensibly becomes a lot easier. With a steady pay check, a payment plan for your mortgage and assurance that you won't have to go around begging once you reach a ripe old age, you'd think that you're safe to breathe easy. But is that really true? Does the fact that many Dutch citizens grade their lives as more than adequate in official surveys say anything about the actual certainty in their lives and the happiness that they experience? Or does it say something about their ability to shut their eyes to the instability of our economic system? And about the price that is paid elsewhere on the planet for their ease of mind, their comfort? It doesn't take a whole lot of digging to uncover the ugly truth that the morality of the banks and pension funds providing these assurances (consider their investment in arms trafficking, fossil fuels, etc.) is, at the very least, questionable and at odds with the future of our planet.

In this context, it is telling that the official reports on Dutch citizens' wellbeing, published annually by the Social Cultural Planning Agency, show the same pattern time and time again, namely that people award their situations a positive grade, considering the pros-

perity they see and experience in their immediate surroundings, but completely turn tack when asked about matters beyond their own garden fence, balcony edge or hedgerow. It seems that the general conviction people share is that while they themselves are sitting pretty, the world at large is heading for a wrong turn.

This discrepancy between visibly prosperous surroundings and the invisible mechanisms underlying said prosperity is an important source for the rise of depression and the accompanying rise in demand for anti-depressants in our modern-day society.

Might this also explain why the historically bright sheen of the idea of prosperity, property and wealth is steadily being chipped away? And why governments that focus merely on raising prosperity are having an increasingly hard time managing their citizens' feelings of unrest? The almost automatic connection between the two realisations that you yourself are doing well but things overall are going poorly (considering, amongst other things, the planet's current rapid decrease in biodiversity) is a permanent shadow hanging over people's supposed happiness.

Happiness, as an isolated and almost permanent state, does not merely seem like a dream of the past – perhaps it is just that. Is the concept of happiness also undergoing dissolution and becoming complex? And is denying said complexity perhaps the quickest, most sure-fire way to unhappiness? In short, is ignoring the truly great challenges that humanity faces and attempting to find refuge in particular interests, in one's own career, not the cause of much of the discrepancy we mentioned earlier? In doing so, are we not driving our own move towards the cynical side of things, where we focus merely on our own well-being at the expense of the larger world, claiming that it can wait?

You could say that it all starts going downhill the moment you audition for a role in the play of traditional capitalism, and stage your

own death by getting through the auditions and accepting the part being offered. You'll appear to have secured a number of short-term goals, yes (money, security of livelihood, comfort), and become a player in the system. But at the same time, you'll have robbed yourself of the opportunity to think deeply about, respond to, and make a meaningful contribution towards dilemmas that might not represent your direct interests but would benefit the planet as a whole (climate change, biodiversity, etc.).

You've given up your chances of living a truly meaningful life.

The vested institutions will condemn the above reasoning as being altogether too bleak and doom-and-gloom. They resist the observation that traditional capitalism has gone bankrupt. That it is a pigeon-holing system that offers no sustainable solutions for the issues of the future. And as of right now, their position remains strong. Traditional capitalism has a wide range of remarkable achievements to reflect on over the past two centuries, and still generates remarkable output that inspires journalists and statisticians to produce books and publications proclaiming that humanity has never been better, and that the modern day truly is the best age to be born into in terms of life expectancy and your chances of happiness.

Moreover, they might argue that there are countless ways to make a meaningful contribution to the future within the current paradigm. Have solar panels installed on your roof, buy an electrical car, have a heat pump installed, eat less meat or stop eating meat altogether... All stepping stones that would seem to positively contribute to the future – and make you feel like a do-gooder in the process.

But that brings us back to the topic we discussed in the first chapter ('Accept Complexity'), namely that traditional capitalism is inclined to hide complexity, its ultimate enemy, from the view of citizens/ voters/consumers, and divide reality into clearly divisible impulses or decisions (mostly when it comes to which product to purchase)

that make you feel like you're on the right track and make you forget that when it comes down to it, such as when you're fired and are without a steady income for a given period of time, you're still dependent on the chains and structures set up by traditional capitalism. You'll be stuck filling out forms for purely bureaucratic purposes, or taking courses that don't interest you, all because you've been told that the supplied knowledge will improve your chances in the labour market, so that you can quickly qualify for being pigeon-holed into another little cubby and continue to perform on behalf of the system.

It is at that moment that you realise you're no longer a real human being, or at least are no longer being seen as such. You've been reduced to a number, to a cubby in a system. This is a less logical thought to have if you're a bank manager who gets paid handsomely, a supervisor in a government ministry or a branch manager for a retail chain. The esteem and sizeable compensation that these kinds of positions entail provide plenty of nourishment for your ego to stay afloat. However, these positions are not that different from the one we described earlier, of someone who has just lost their job. You're both part of the same play, with the same pre-determined roles. There is no escape, whether you are on the winning or losing side.

Voilà – the contours of the 'silent revolution' that has been unfolding in the west in recent years: a growing number of young people are no longer willing to travel these well-beaten tracks, and choose instead to become self-employed.

Before we get into this silent revolution in more detail, let's examine the stigma attached to the abbreviation used in the Netherlands for such self-employed individuals: 'ZZP', which means 'self-employed without staff'. It indicates that society, following the government's lead, has already decided, subconsciously or otherwise, to brand these people with a name that openly showcases their main defect: they do not have staff! What a disgrace. Enclosed within this nomen-

clature is the tacit accusation that self-employed people are egotistical loners that do not contribute to society because they do not employ staff, meaning that they do not (want to) take care of other people. This negative designation and approach would seem to be symptomatic for the way in which society as a whole, and government workers in particular, view this subset of workers.

To radically shift society's view of self-employed people and help them finally be appreciated for what they truly are – increasingly the creative, agile, loyal and highly motivated backbone of our economy – we propose getting rid of the middle letter in the 'ZZP' abbreviation and truncating it to 'ZP', meaning 'self-employed professionals', a title that does justice to the achievements and potential of this group of working people.

Goodbye to all 'self-employed without staff', and hello, self-employed professionals! There, now that that's sorted... let's continue where we left off.

You would think that self-employed professionals, people who make a conscious choice to invest in their own talents and growth, would be welcomed and celebrated for their mental fortitude and optimism, but the political climate remains very uneasy, and often downright hostile, in dealing with them. It's almost funny, or should we say sad, to see how many meeting hours and how much energy are invested to draw up policy regarding self-employed professionals. Surely most of these attempts are made with the very best intentions, but apparently, vested institutions are aware that something has to be 'done about them'. Oddly enough, the notion of wanting to keep hold of the reins of your own work and your professional fulfilment and wanting to choose for yourself which networks to be a part of is not encouraged, but instead viewed as a problem to be dealt with.

What could possibly be problematic about that, you'll want to ask. Well, the 'problem' boils down to this; self-employed professionals

do not fit into the existing system with all of its pre-established partitions, and so policies are drafted left, right and centre to somehow get them 'back in line' and make them fit.

When will we as a society realise that a modest self-employed professional who has self-created value within their own network, someone who does not make ridiculous amounts of money but is able to work freely on solutions that they feel are necessary or urgent, may be a better role model for future generations than any suited-up politician surrounded by advisors and elaborate provisions, who appears in TV show after TV show to tell the populace how we must all go on? Who even believes in such figureheads anymore? Or in the underlying play to begin with? Who amongst us still believes that the existing policy mills actually produce the solutions and improvements that would most benefit the planet and humanity as a whole?

Even if you look beyond the endless squabbling in politics, you need only have a look at the endless list of laws that the Dutch government created over the years to increase flexibility for self-employed professionals in the labour market. First, there was the Deregulation of Employment Relationship Assessment act, which failed to pass through the required houses three times over. Its successor was the completely inefficient Act on Labour and Security. To make up for said act's failings, the new government then came up with the current Law on the Reform of the Labour Market. In short, to keep existing political parties and vested interests happy, politicians squabble on and on, back and forth, instead of starting from scratch to come up with a new system for defining employment relationships and the compensation and risks involved, based on the valid assumption that the role played by self-employed professionals in the economy will continue to become more prominent and more determinative.

Instead, outdated dogmas about easily predicted careers and top-down management continue to haunt the topic of the labour market, like the immovable ghosts of a bygone era, and the political realm

and all of its civil servants condemn themselves to producing a warren of bureaucratic legislation that painstakingly avoids the real matter at hand – which sacred cows should be sacrificed for the sake of a new, future-oriented labour market. One of the aforementioned cows is obviously the fact that the current labour market allows for only two roles, namely that of 'employer' and 'employee'. You are either one or the other, with no overlap permitted; the entire system or farcical play is founded upon that single erroneous assumption.

There are only two roles in this play, and the playwright refuses to accept a more elaborate cast of characters.

Underlying the pointless back-and-forth on this topic is something one could call 'double complexity', i.e., a fruitful type of complexity on the one hand (which has you starting from scratch to find a fundamentally new system to set up the flexible labour market that the future needs), and a non-fruitful type on the other hand (which has you navigating around existing taboos or sensitivities in the labour market, imposing a maze of complicated legislation to try – and fail – to keep both sides happy). It is obvious that the various cabinets the Netherlands has had in recent years have wholeheartedly thrown themselves into this non-fruitful complexity – and they keep trying in spite of a long list of past failures, butting their heads against the same stone over and over again.

All in all, the cumbersome and largely failing legislative process surrounding the notion of a more flexible labour market perfectly illustrates a maxim that we would argue applies in many other areas as well:

The moment you fail to recognise the complexity of an issue or fail to do so in time, things really get complex.

This applies not just on government level, but also on individual level. If you are not or insufficiently aware of the complexity of a

particular topic or decision (such as when you sign a contract prematurely and it turns out to contain some nasty clauses later on), things will get even more complicated at a later stage. For example, pop singer George Michael once signed a contract that obligated him to produce a certain number of albums under the Sony label, only to then spend years wrapped up in a legal battle to escape that very contract.

This example may seem like a mere footnote in history, but when you ask people what is keeping them from what they want and need, such as to attain personal happiness, it often turns out that they agreed to things in the past that now make them feel stuck (such as a mortgage). Once you're in that kind of situation and a piece of paper starts determining the direction of your life, things get really tricky. No one wants that. That type of complexity is beneficial to no one; it only hampers you.

Ironically, traditional capitalism and all of its clever products such as apps and gadgets do everything in their power to keep the complexity of so many issues out of your life, offering ostensibly clear and easy options, such as mortgages, and thus making genuinely smart decisions harder instead of easier to make.

See, another reason to abandon traditional capitalism: it gets you involved in the wrong kind of complexity.

LET SLEEPING EGOS LIE

**or: how to serve the world and
yourself better with a more
realistic self-image**

Here in the west, satisfaction has become a taboo. We are all driven by an almost psychotic urge to 'set goals' for ourselves, and by definition those goals have to be something we haven't accomplished yet. In fact, the further off the goal is from our current situation, the more ambitious it is, and the more esteem and applause will come our way. In short, the greater the distance between 'where you are' and 'where you're going', the more positive people's estimation of you becomes. Ambition is the engine that drives innovation and creative solutions, so wanting to achieve ambitious objectives is a useful impulse at heart. Things get interesting when you start to ask yourself the question whether your goals should primarily serve your ego, your positive sense of self, or whether they should be primarily geared towards improving the world around you – for the common good, so to speak.

There is so much progress to be made in this area.

How often do we not see objectives being set that are mainly geared towards making the individual or the institution feel good about themselves? Of course, individual people aren't the only ones with egos; companies and organisations have a type of 'ego' too, although it's typically referred to under a different name – their 'image', say, or their 'reputation'. Think about this for a minute... How often are decisions made purely to confirm one's own importance, one's own indispensability? As a society, we are still prone to thinking that people who have thousands of 'subordinates' must be important people.

And when these people receive such confirmation of their own importance constantly, they'll eventually start to believe it. Large-scale mergers between companies are often secretly prompted by a desire of the manager or director to improve their own reputation, following this reasoning: the bigger the company in which I occupy a senior position, the more important I am, and the bigger my pay check will be! Add to that the fact that the media like to chat with these managers and directors to improve their own reputations in turn, and hey presto – what looks like a proper, legal, perfectly planned merger (marketed as 'necessary' or, better yet, a 'win-win!') is actually a veritable orgy of egos and hormones celebrating their self-importance.

Can this problem, this tendency of people to be primarily focused on our own status and indispensability, ever be solved, considering that we ourselves, those very people, will have to do the solving? It's perfectly understandable to be sceptical about that. World-famous scientists and authors will tell you that people's motives for striving for far-off objectives are made up of both egoistic and altruistic elements, which intermingle and cannot be separated. Just recently, author and columnist Arnon Grunberg argued that the nurses who perform the most thankless, least ambitious tasks in nursing homes and the like, appearing to self-sacrificially strive for the common good, are still driven, at least to some extent, by the energy they receive back from performing those tasks, whether from co-workers or management or from those they are caring for. In short, any human relationship, whether with another human being or with a paid or voluntary activity, can only be maintained if energy continues to flow both ways. We are always both givers and recipients, meaning that there is no such thing as a completely egoistic or a completely altruistic act and that ego will always continue to play a role.

Nonetheless, there is plenty of reason to suspect that ego is going to have a tough time of it soon. People's idea of their own indispensability is going to change, whether they want it to or not, and the main reason for this shift will be...

Technology!

Let's take the sport of chess as a metaphor. Whereas chess grandmasters used to be seen as possessors of unfathomable intellects who were able to inexplicably conjure up genius moves from the depths of their impressive brains, the game of chess is now dominated by computers that enable you to win the world championships simply by pressing the on/off switch. In short, making clever moves, not just in chess, but also in managerial or organisational terms, is no longer the exclusive domain of ego-driven people, but of lightning-speed, pre-programmed algorithms in computers.

In short, it has been demonstrated more than ever that we humans are in fact replaceable.

Naturally, the ego refuses to give up without a fight. Remember the sneering comments back when websites like Amazon.com first started to recommend books to you based on clever software and your previous online behaviour? The nerve, telling me what books I do and do not like! I think that's still for me to decide, thank you very much, and not for this upstart of a website that I use every now and then. Now, years later, people's aversion to these kinds of automated recommendations has mostly passed. We simply shrug and accept things as they are – it's become normal to us to be recommended things in this manner, regardless of whether we actually take the digital recommendations seriously and follow them, or whether we simply dismiss them with a single mouse click.

If the speed with which we have come to accept digital recommendations is any indication of the general speed with which aversion turns into acceptance, or even into enthusiasm, it would seem that ego is willing to cede some ground. The way in which we are already willing to outsource our selection of music (Spotify), public transport (travel planners), or food (Uber Eats) to apps proves the assertion that we're quite willing to let ourselves be hemmed in by software.

That sounds a bit negative – let's say that in areas where ego permits (music, public transport, food, etc.), we are happy to engage into an equally pragmatic and fruitful collaboration with technology that provides us with a steady stream of enjoyable music, smooth travel and delicious food.

Our claim that this collaboration between people and technology will expand and that we have thus begun to evolve into a species that is less about ego and more about software will earn lots of disparaging shakes of the head from ageing liberals whose ideology revolves around the idea of free individuals. Considering people as individuals and taking into account their desire for absolute freedom of choice, those headshakes are understandable. But we have two questions to pose in response. First of all, how free are individuals really in traditional capitalism, which (as we have demonstrated previously) is fading fast? Is that perceived freedom anything more than the freedom to be shuffled from one pigeonhole to the next? Second of all, how objectionable is this development of 'less ego, more software' really when we look at the massive challenges our planet faces, particularly with regard to matters like biodiversity and climate change?

For the sake of bringing global-scale solutions closer, is it not a god-send when more people abandon their (emotional) egos in favour of (rational) technology?

Wouldn't governments and their peoples both gain in efficacy and in well-being if they were to lean into this shift of 'less ego, more software'? For example, consider the amount of emotion and inefficiency involved in a process like Brexit, and how completely pointless all of those arguments and developments are when viewed in light of the global climate crisis!

The common saying 'ego is a bitch' may well grow to be more than a cliché intended to curb people's egotism. In the wider context of

the global challenges we face, it could be merely an expression of an attitude which we will become more willing to adopt than we are now: more humble, less selfish. With the immediate added benefit that we will spend less time on spectacles like Brexit, which could indeed (certainly on the part of the British) be characterised as an orgy of egos.

Politics – the ultimate way to waste precious time.

HAVE YOUR HEAD BE YOUR PRIMARY DESTINATION

**or: how clever reflecting
on your situation can
prevent needless stress and
environmentally unfriendly
mobility**

It's perfectly possible that within the foreseeable future, we will be viewing traditional capitalism as an outdated system in which you simply did not need to think. Your life path, regardless of your background, level of intelligence and individual skills, was more or less pre-determined. First, you went to school to get a basic education. Then, you pursued subsequent education to prepare for a particular profession, after which you entered the labour market to find a permanent position somewhere. This job would then enable you to get a mortgage and buy a house, and then you would use said house to establish a family (or not, occasionally). Your old age was also accounted for, because regular instalments paid by your employer ensured that you would be able to live out your days in financial comfort. This life path was sufficiently advocated for and dressed up with advantages by all major institutions that the large majority of people simply went along with it. It was a kind of game board on which everyone moved along, step by step, at roughly the same speed, going through the same motions, like pawns of equal value. We were tamed, trained to obey, and on looking back we can now all agree, with not a small tinge of nostalgia, that 'optimism' and 'freedom' were in their heydays then (were things really quite so wonderful, though?). We are collectively terrified of the idea of a future that offers less certainty.

And we can all see that this pre-determined life path is fast disappearing.

It is human to have difficulty saying goodbye to anything – in this case, to the idea of a pre-ordained, smooth life path.

Who doesn't want to be able to live thoughtlessly, sure in the knowledge that a path has been laid out for you? And that you'll be taken care of when you suffer an accident or setback? Who would enjoy waking up from such a comforting dream, and realising that what you always saw as certainty has in fact been false certainty all along? That what you always saw as safety was in fact false safety? Let's take an accessible example which traditional capitalism has not quite yet given up on: mobility.

Because millions of people are stuck in the life path we just described and dutifully trudge back and forth to the office every day so as to keep the whole thing going (and let's be honest, their monthly pay checks are the main thing keeping them from quitting), road congestion is on the rise, while at the same time, the government is scared to oppose the portion of the electorate that is trapped in this way of life. For many years, academics and politicians in the Netherlands have been fighting over this topic. Academics claim that congestion charges are inevitable if we want to reduce the number of traffic jams. Politicians resist that notion. They are almost militant in their defence of 'hardworking citizens' who have 'no viable alternative' to the daily commute to the office. To punish them even further by making them pay for their contribution to traffic congestion would be almost inhumane! In short, politicians put commuters on a pedestal of victimhood, portraying them as well-intentioned sobs who need mental and financial support, or at the very least need to be treated kindly and spared any additional burdens. But let's turn the argument on its head for a second: aren't commuters the perpetrators of the crime, instead of the victims? Shouldn't politicians take a broader view, stop facilitating herd behaviour and start questioning, or better yet, actively disrupting said behaviour, thinking in the long term?

The friendly response to this alliance between politicians and commuters would be that they are both trapped in the very same life path and therefore recognise one another's plight and are willing to excuse one another's refusal to look beyond one's own ship. Even now, there are a great deal of new motorways in the pipeline here in the Netherlands, which will permanently disfigure valuable areas of nature and condemn peaceful neighbourhoods to deal with either ugly noise barriers or increased noise pollution, all for the sake of easing commuters' suffering. And then to think that we actually know for a fact that the addition of new roads does not solve the issue of road congestion! It only stimulates people to not think too critically about the distance between their home and their workplace, sure in the knowledge that a couple of new lanes will be added soon to ensure the traffic jams and travel times won't be too bad. New motorways not only destroy beautiful natural havens in an already overcrowded country like the Netherlands, they also stimulate counterproductive behaviour, 'old-way thinking'. And yet we keep doing it, as though we are on autopilot. Because the various policy domains involved are divided across different ministries and those ministries traditionally like to keep to their own, no one asks the much-needed question of whether we really need more motorways. Instead, we ask how many new motorways to add. Not: 'Why are all those cars stuck on the road every single day?' Instead: 'What would be an acceptable delay to get from point A to point B?' Not: 'What in God's name are we all doing?' Instead: 'How would a decrease in road congestion serve us in the next election?'

Our desire to drown ourselves in increasing the number of asphalt lanes is truly astonishing, when you stop to think about it.

The less friendly response to the continued asphalt mania is that the political realm, serving its own interests, likes to keep road construction workers in a job, likes to brag about the job opportunities being created, and is happy to prioritise short-term economic growth over long-term quality of life.

Once again, the complexity of the conflict of interest between economy and ecology, the complicated maze of practical and impractical, necessary and feasible measures, is kept far from the public's eye. It is instead debated over at so-called climate change panels, which even grant representatives of fossil fuel companies a substantial vote! Even putting aside the dubiousness of the fact that these companies, representatives of the system we are trying to escape, are thus in a position to fight and delay much-needed climate policy, there is a more severe consequence politically speaking. The complexity of these considerations is carefully kept out of sight from the public, and as such, the majority of people do not get the chance to understand why certain measures are and are not taken, so that we see only the bizarre end result, the incomprehensible final image – namely that of traditional capitalism forging full steam ahead, with politicians' approval, in its continuous search for growth, while said politicians claim in the very same breath that climate change is their main priority.

What could be a more effective recipe for populism than politicians consistently proving to their constituents that they do not take their own promises and ideas seriously – even worse, that they are willing to do the exact opposite of what they claim to be doing for the sake of electoral gain? Moreover, how could you possibly convince voters to make all sorts of expensive environmentally friendly changes to their homes while high-profile industries are permitted to keep polluting for the sake of safeguarding jobs and gross national product? How two-faced can you get?

However, we do not advocate cynicism in this book – although the analysis of the current situation offered above would justify cynicism twice over. The problem with cynicism is that it cultivates hard feelings regarding the inconsistency and hypocrisy of the political system, thus making it easy for the political system to dismiss your voice as that of a negative thinker who does not want to participate, as tacit permission for the system to keep going as it always has.

At the same time, you'll be convinced you're on the right side of things, which will make you feel good, but won't convince anyone to take the kind of initiative that would challenge the current political system.

As we've said before, a single decision, a single purchase or a single charitable deed won't be enough to create an alternative for the current way of things. That kind of short-term, gratification-oriented thinking is precisely the kind of thinking that is keeping traditional capitalism alive. It would suggest that you need only show a moment of courage, pop your head out of your cocoon for just a second, only to bask with self-satisfaction after said decision, purchase, or deed has been completed. What's needed instead is a fundamentally different, probing approach to dealing with reality, ignoring hypes, supposed obligations and outside expectations, that enables you to determine for yourself what you think is important, what you want to achieve, what you want to contribute to. If you don't do so and permanently imprison yourself in a web of outside expectations, such as having an office job, being stuck in traffic, having a long commute, driving around looking for a parking spot, and then finally jumping out of your car and rushing to get to your meeting in time (in short, things which anyone will agree are not the most important things in life) will slowly but surely start to make up the lion's share of your life.

So how do you prevent life from being flooded with stress about unimportant things like that?

As shown in our section about self-employed professionals, your focus shouldn't be on your place in the system but on the kind of contribution you want and are able to make to a particular issue or challenge, or to solve a particular pressing problem. Your own desire to contribute should be the leading factor.

And once you're mentally ready to put your own needs first and start looking for (digital) places where precisely those issues, challenges

and problems that interest you are the main items on the agenda, you're very likely to find a network or organisation that will value your contribution. And by then, you probably won't even be asked to commute from point A to point B every day or several days a week. You'll instead go wherever it is that your network or organisation hopes to receive your custom contributions: hopefully not to some ugly building in an industrial park somewhere, but online.

The need for people to commute to physical office buildings won't simply disappear overnight, of course. But it would be great (and much smarter) if people were stimulated to work from home or close to home, eventually becoming the norm. This would clear the roads for people who deliberately choose to do things differently and do want to set out on the road every day, whom you can then impose a perfectly logical congestion charge on.

Older generations might feel that positioning oneself as an extension to the online economy with its ever-changing demands and needs is like giving up your freedom. However, doing so is also a form of liberation, and most young people are seeing that side of the coin nowadays. Just think – being your own boss, not having to obey orders issued by a superior and instead engaging in continuous dialogue with the network you are a part of! At home, or at least close to home. No more studying to obtain an arbitrary degree, only to end up endlessly chugging along congested roads to get to a distant office where you barely use your obtained knowledge and instead are forced to obey the rules imposed upon you by others, resulting in the necessary frustrations and conflicts. Instead, you'll be in an environment you like, in your own head, doing your own thing, learning and developing as you go.

The ideal travel destination is not out there, in the world; it is your very own brain.

LET'S SAY GOODBYE TO TRADITIONAL CAPITALISM

or: how negative, backward-oriented thinking limits your opportunities for the future.

Professor Jan Rotmans once said that we're not living in an 'era of change', but in a 'change of era'. In saying so, he suggests that we've reached a time where the focus is no longer on perfecting existing processes, spectacular as they may be (consider the plans for subterranean tunnels that would allow trains to reach speeds that only airplanes are able to hit as of right now). Instead, this 'change of era', a much more impactful thing, requires us to come up with an entirely new way of thinking. For that to happen, you have to be willing to accept that what was once up is now down and vice versa, so to speak. Many modern writers have called this new way of thinking, this boldness to look at things in a radically different, future-oriented manner and then act on it, a 'tilt' – a word that has since begun to lead a life of its own!

In no time, conferences, forums and gatherings to discuss the 'tilt' concept were everywhere. And yes, it is a positive thing on the one hand for people to show such interest in the tilt, for them to encourage and inspire one another to do things differently, set up their lives differently. A core group of such pioneers, such optimistically minded enthusiasts, is in fact essential in order for the tilt to actually happen. After all, such enthusiasm is intrinsically contagious. The problem with this group of people, according to traditional media culture, is that they simply get down to it. They are practically oriented, offer their service wholeheartedly, and are often very locally based.

As such, they are not interesting for the media, who garner prestige from ratings and visitor numbers. Such numbers are not driven by small initiatives and well-intentioned small business owners, but by high-level people – top executives in major companies, people in leading ministerial positions (the ones stuck in a pigeon hole, a set role in the play) – who are busy arguing with one another about how to run things. Those arguments make for great journalistic material – the kind that gets people’s attention, that gets people reading that particular magazine or newspaper.

As such, it can be enormously tempting to fight the tilt by being deliberately polarising, by placing a magnifying glass over the contrasts between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ world (with the new world as the ideal future). This book can also not help but to focus on the failures of what we have termed traditional capitalism. This is the world’s oldest trick of rhetoric: to reduce the world to two scenarios and then present those as diametrically opposed, one good, one bad. This creates a suggestion of easy, clear choices – which goes against one of our central tenets, namely to ‘accept complexity’.

Polarisation, with its preconceived objective of creating contrasts, actually serves the framework presented by commercial media.

As such, we try (although we do sometimes fail) to minimise such negativism. After all, the main focus should never be just to de-value traditional capitalism. The conclusion that this system has had its uses and is now not long for this world need not be bitterly, reproachingly drawn. Every system has a limited shelf life. And the notion that the people still advocating for traditional capitalism are suddenly driven by evil motives, pursuing their own gain at the cost of others, and therefore need to be stopped as soon as possible, is very unlikely.

In fact, we would argue for taking the opposite approach; to congratulate traditional capitalism on its ability to drive prosperity

and progress for two centuries (banning all thoughts of the recent credit crunch for a moment), on the fact that it has created (in some parts of the world, at least) an incredibly prosperous society, and on continuing to fight tooth and nail for our personal freedoms to this day. Even so, that does not decrease the necessity or urgency of the conclusion that this same traditional capitalism, whether due to internal circumstances (ageing command structures, decreasing motivation) or external ones (including the issue of climate change), needs to be replaced, and soon. Not because it is inherently more corrupt or amoral than any other systems or than ever before. On the contrary – it tries its utmost (whether earnestly motivated or not) to adapt to the new age and generate goodwill with new measures and positions like 'Sustainability Manager'. No, it needs to be replaced because, thanks to the digital dimension, the turbulent growth of Internet and data streams, there are now alternatives that would simply do the job better – contribute more to the wellbeing of people and the planet in this 21st century, with its specific focus areas of climate change, global food supplies, mobility, privacy, biodiversity, migration and terrorism.

Just to be clear...

The Internet has not attacked or intentionally deposed traditional capitalism. It has simply bypassed it, creating a breeding ground for smarter solutions. The core question here is as follows: when will the political realm and the corporate world embrace not just the logistical and financial advantages of online (which they are more than happy to do), but also the organisational and societal advantages (decentralisation) that are presented as problematic and threatening by the current generation of business leaders and politicians, whose ultimate nightmare is the loss of power?

In short, how can we break with the current, slow, procedurally closed-off, cliquish systems in favour of open and decentralised decision-making processes?

(For example, why are the elite so fearful of the political instrument known as the referendum? Why do they feel the need to keep the public as unaware as possible of the complexity that surrounds them on all sides? Anyhow, referendums and their political sensitivity are a topic we will discuss in much greater detail later on).

Even a thoroughly decent, polite innovator like journalist and author Rob Wijnberg, fellow founder of journalistic platform 'The Correspondent', resorted to sneering at the traditional media realm for publicity's sake back when he launched his initiative in the United States. He has a habit of launching such criticisms, dating back to a piece from early 2018 in which he mercilessly dissects the traditional media's failure to function properly. Here are a few passages from said piece, the first about the outdated categorisations that persist in traditional journalism:

"Take the most commonly occurring news categories that are maintained by almost all traditional news media: 'Domestic', 'Foreign', 'Economy', 'Politics'... This categorisation seems sensible and even objective, but it could not be further from the reality of how our modern-day world functions. (...) Nowadays, this categorisation fails entirely to describe the most important developments around us. Climate, capital, migration, terrorism – none of these stick to arbitrary national borders. Multinationals and financial markets hold more power than states and their electorates, and governments in turn are entirely bound up in the market economy. In short, what is domestic is also foreign and vice versa, and what is economic is also political and vice versa."

The second passage about the destructive effect of polarisation and the role the media play in stimulating said polarisation reads as follows:

"It is self-evident that the news media are the major catalyst of this adversarial thinking. If you follow the news even a little, you will be

bombarded with a daily stream of news items, opinion pieces, blogs and vlogs that enforce one polarising frame or another. (...)

This polarisation is so strong that any idea of a shared reality is in danger of being banished to fairyland – and as such, any normal, proper conversation about politics and our society is made impossible. While the universe surrounding our planet continues to expand, our political-social universe is shrinking steadily, growing smaller and smaller until the only truth that remains is one's own ideology."

Here is a third passage, about an inspiring direction in which to find a solution:

"One of the best suggestions so far was made by political scientist Albert Jan Kruiter on our podcast 'De Rudi & Freddie Show'. Kruiter proposed the idea of a Divorce correspondent, as nearly half of all marriages in Western society fail, and this phenomenon in turn explains countless other societal problems."

Soon after having incurred the ire of his former colleagues amongst the 'established media brands', Wijnberg rushed to emphasise that not all journalists working for traditional media are engaged in wilfully misinforming their readers, or get up in the morning thinking, 'You know what I'm in the mood for? A day of good ol' polarisation!' As the former editor-in-chief of popular research newspaper nrc. next, Wijnberg knows like no other how many talented journalists still walk the halls of traditional newspaper concerns. These people are not malicious; they do not wilfully commit wrongful acts. At the same time, Wijnberg makes it crystal clear that these journalists are on a ship that's heading in the wrong direction – or, at the very least, in a direction that allows them to be at all relevant in the face of the challenges that humanity and the planet we live on are going to be faced with in the coming decades. Wijnberg considers this collection of journalistic talent, still huddled up in the traditional pigeonholes, to be a horrible waste.

His own platform, 'The Correspondent', and his considered choice to leave an established newspaper and start out fresh with kindred spirits make Rob Wijnberg a compelling role model in our eyes.

In a sense, he is the personification of the idea that you're better off abandoning clear categorisation, fake assurances and pointless sensation-seeking that only serves to cause needless stress. In founding 'The Correspondent', he took his leave of the play, stripped himself of the costume that went along with his traditional role, and jumped into the deep end, into unknown territory, where he has been forced to rediscover everything himself, in close collaboration with a small but dedicated team. This new space has enabled him to unabashedly ask new questions, such as: 'Is the new generation of news consumers willing to pay for journalism?' 'Is there a way to pay the bills while also, or perhaps even mainly, publishing long stories about non-sexy subjects?' 'How can you still draw enough attention to yourself if you don't want to fall back into adversarial thinking?' And most importantly: 'How do you manage a journalistic organisation that consists not of subscribers, but of members?'

To bring things back to the central tenet of this book: by founding 'The Correspondent', Rob Wijnberg has deliberately sought out and embraced complexity.

Does that make him a masochist? On the contrary! His eventual reward is huge – however, it is mostly of an immaterial nature. Instead of working on a ship that he feels is moving in the wrong direction, despite him trying (and mostly failing) to steer it in the right direction, he promoted himself to captain of a new ship, so that he and a small group of insiders can now set their own course. With 'The Correspondent', Wijnberg is also meeting the stringent requirements of Rotmans, whose provocative but radical statement about a 'change of era' essentially dismisses all sorts of innovations that only make things move faster, more efficient, or more smoothly as too banal (after all, they fit into our existing society). Rotmans

feels it is not enough to keep making the standard attempts to increase speed and efficiency in order to achieve this 'change of era'. Instead, crucial elements of society, such as journalism, need to be rethought, reinvented, and perhaps inverted entirely.

They need to be tilted.

Cynics might scoff at our argument that Rob Wijnberg is doing something special. Isn't he just following the beaten path of a dissatisfied employee who leaves the company, burns all of his bridges, and starts a risky new venture to surpass the organisation he left in such frustration? What's new about that approach? Isn't that dynamic of frustration and lack of recognition precisely what the economic growing power of traditional capitalism is largely based on? Such criticisms would indeed be justified if Wijnberg has simply founded a competing newspaper that he thought would serve the target audience better than his old employer (in this case, nrc.next), only to then produce and distribute his new newspaper according to the same set pattern. What Wijnberg did was different. In founding 'The Correspondent', he decided to address the public directly and experiment with a new type of journalism, one that not only invites people to become a member so as to ensure the financial security of the new platform, but also encourages them to add their own expertise to the platform and add online knowledge on specific subjects. Essentially, this is an attempt to recruit as-of-yet unutilised expertise, using the 'wisdom of the crowd' to do justice to subjects by using a more comprehensive, decentralised approach.

What lessons might we take from meaningful innovations like 'The Correspondent'?

For starters, that it can be tempting even for innovative initiatives like 'The Correspondent' to adopt a combative attitude. To bid adieu to the 'old world' with a theatrical, negative gesture, and thus attract

the necessary attention by setting oneself apart from the daily onslaught of news. What else?

We also know that the kick-off of the Dutch crowdfunding campaign on BNN VARA's primetime news panel show 'De Wereld Draait Door' not only gave the launch of 'The Correspondent' some momentum but also showed that 'old media' can still serve a purpose by helping out initiatives that strive for the aforementioned tilt. Moreover, that it's not somehow shameful to spend a few years marinating in the old media landscape first (like Wijnberg did) before taking the eventual plunge.

'The Correspondent' once again made clever use of old-world media for its crowdfunding campaign in the United States. By looking for famous Americans to serve as ambassadors for the new initiative, 'The Correspondent' mixed the 'bottom-up' ideal (voluntarily supporting an idealistic new journalistic platform with your own money) with the old 'top-down' model (ambassadors who you may admire or respect considerably are exerting indirect pressure to urge you to become a member of 'The Correspondent').

In short, the lesson here is to distinguish as sharply as you can between a critical analysis of traditional capitalism on the one hand, which serves no purpose other than to demonstrate the limitations and impending downfall of said system, and your own framework and perspective for action on the other hand. Maybe that means you need to first spend years rubbing shoulders with old-world players, fruitlessly trying to push the stringent boundaries of that world, before starting a new, successful initiative yourself.

Don't give yourself over to negative, backward-oriented thinking. It limits your opportunities for the future.

A NEW WAY TO CRITIQUE – BY COMING UP WITH BETTER SOLUTIONS

**or: forget the eternal battle
about who's right**

Not too long ago, in the seventies of the previous century, engaging in debate was viewed almost as a guarantee of intellectual growth. Universities at the time were bastions of manifold, extensive discussion on all levels. These were the high days of the 'left' and 'right', whose ideas about what was and wasn't justified were diametrically opposed. The left felt that it was justified that knowledge, power and income were distributed amongst all in a more equal fashion. The right, in turn, felt that it was justified for you to have to work hard for a while before you were entitled to a comfortable income, and considered the left to be a bunch of overly kind-hearted, overly naïve idealists, happy to hand out gifts and favours to the population, undermining society's work ethic and prosperity. Both camps were irreconcilably opposed. The right, consisting mostly of hard-working citizens, was generally too busy to really engage in discussion, and the left, consisting mostly of students and adolescents, had all the time in the world to discuss at long length how an ideal society should be organised, and how the right should be defeated – with a gentle hand or an iron fist?

Pieter Zwart, manager and founder of electronics website Coolblue and one of the most influential and inspiring entrepreneurs of our time, recently said in an interview that he wants as little discussion within his company as possible. He feels that discussion is merely a static battle between 'pro' and 'con' that has a tendency to merely spin in endless circles. He said that he really only allows discussion about a single subject within Coolblue.

Data.

He cited a number of good reasons why he feels that data is the only subject worth having a difference of opinion on. One of the most interesting points he mentioned is the fact that a discussion about data is not dependent on preconceived opinions or the amount of knowledge you have, putting the participants on fundamentally more equal footing in Zwart's eyes. He said the following:

"The great thing is that everyone at the table has or could have access to the same data and is therefore equally able to make a valuable contribution to the discussion, from manager to intern to receptionist. I feel like those kinds of discussions are much more valuable and effective than political discussions that revolve solely around whether you are in favour or against."

Precisely because Zwart is not a politician but an entrepreneur and the future is not merely an abstraction to him but a battlefield on which he wants to win, he pulls no punches and dares to point out what he perceives to be the biggest weakness of the existing political culture: sluggishness. In the following citation, he urges the government to speed things up a notch, or its legislation and regulations will soon become irrelevant on their own.

"From my perspective as an entrepreneur, politics moves incredibly slow. Compared to the speed at which we implement software updates, sometimes several times a day, the pace at which decisions are made and laws are passed in The Hague is quite laughable. It often takes years! (...) I feel like legislation is just another kind of software. It steers the country, and if it no longer moves in synchronisation with the day-to-day reality, it's just a matter of time until companies start to find ways to circumvent or abuse it. As such, I feel like it is an inherent national interest to keep legislation accurate and up to date."

Zwart has expressed his horror at the idea that even in this 21st century, as his company is in urgent need of well-trained, talented programmers, secondary school students are still wasting their time on learning Ancient Greek and Latin. This anti-historical, anti-ideological, present-oriented entrepreneurial attitude could be termed radical pragmatism. In light of tradition and the necessary reflection, there are some criticisms that could be levelled against this attitude (why reject the past so thoroughly? Why actively shut yourself off from ancient cultures that could help us understand the present world we live in?). Even so, chances are that the political realm will sooner listen to innovative companies introducing new future perspectives (and revenue models) than to citizens seeking the stage with costly lists of requirements.

Some say we've reached a point where the corporate world is now running the show, politically speaking, and that radical pragmatism, in spite of Zwart's dissatisfaction, is no longer a future prospect but our current reality. The most often heard complaint about this radical pragmatism is that it robs the political realm of ideals, solutions and distant perspectives, and reduces it to instant, reflexive 'Problem? Solution!' thinking. The observation that this reflex is becoming more and more prominent is essentially correct. Anyone who has ever watched the so-called 'question time' in Dutch parliament cannot help but feel that the parliamentarians are generally little more than messengers passing on the complaints that have ended up in their mailboxes. The interesting question here is whether the political realm is suffering a loss by being merely a messenger of dissatisfaction, or whether it is reaping a benefit. Is it perhaps good that often time-consuming ideals are being forced aside by the acute complaints of citizens, so that any problems are addressed as soon as possible and people and things can smoothly go on as though nothing had ever happened?

In short, is it merely a bygone, pragmatic dream for parliament to be more than an objective mouthpiece of bottlenecks in society?

Or is the efficiency that would be achieved by such an objective mouthpiece in fact something to actively strive for, so that problems quickly come to light and can be promptly resolved? Taking Pieter Zwart's notion of legislation as a type of software to be updated as soon as possible, it would indeed be desirable for parties with extreme or highly ideologically motivated (and thus delaying) standpoints to disappear or be outmanoeuvred, for the sake of the 'Problem? Solution!' reflex.

Dutch political party Forum for Democracy currently has the most complete system for fostering pragmatism and fighting delays. They negatively refer to the old-guard, ideologically divided political parties as the 'party cartel', which they want to get rid of as soon as possible so that a 'corporate cabinet' can be appointed, made up of as many proven experts in their field as possible. According to party leader Thierry Baudet, this is the best way to eliminate the puppet theatre that is the current political climate and create a more efficient political system instead. (How the appointment of expert ministers meshes with the democratic principles of the Forum is a different matter entirely. One way would be to allow for steering or correcting of the ministers by public referenda.)

Belarus-born Evgeny Morozov, one of the most well-known authors on the topics of technology and society, is an active adversary of this overdone pragmatism advocated by Coolblue founder Pieter Zwart and the Forum for Democracy. He feels that we actually need to relearn how to have fundamentally different opinions about the question of how we as a society want to utilise technology in terms of democracy, privacy and healthcare. He feels that these kinds of discussions could never be too lengthy and that they help us deal with technological innovations. As such, he actively argues in favour of 'politicisation' (i.e. delay). However interesting and provocative Morozov's books and talks may be, the question here is whether digital technology hasn't already reached a stage where it just progresses autonomously and is so powerful and dominant already that

Morozov's cries are in vain, and the time for politicisation or delays has come and gone.

Aart van Veller, in his early thirties and fellow founder of sustainable energy company Vandebroon, is the personification of radical pragmatism. He has abandoned all types of politicisation, and is driven nearly every minute of his working days by the attractive idea of contributing to the solution or at least the deceleration of climate change. He once considered becoming an activist after visiting the melting North Pole, but soon realised that the activist's weapons, and particularly the activist's way of delivering critique, would not make a difference (or not one big enough, at least). The following quotation could be seen as a declaration of principle for Van Veller's entire generation:

"You could start a hundred petitions against the current economic system, but those won't cause a single company to change a single policy. Instead, you have to become an entrepreneur and market something that is better than the status quo in all possible ways."

Like Pieter Zwart, Van Veller deliberately avoids differences of opinion. Both consider such differences a waste of time. Van Veller argues that polluting companies won't be driven to change by pamphlets, critical articles or petitions, but only by competition that threatens their revenue model. So what do we need to do? We need to be clever and pose competition to polluters! Van Veller doesn't really care about his customers' opinions, about whether they are aware of the importance of climate change and act accordingly – so long as they end up being his customers and not his polluting competitors'.

"Make things incredibly easy for consumers, so that they'll end up being your customers and no one else's. That is the only way to change an industry, to make it more sustainable: by showing that your new way of running a business is a better guarantee for long-term success."

The end result of this radical pragmatism is that it'll never be hard to explain to your children what you did that day when you come home from work. ('Oh, just getting as many people as possible to switch to sustainable energy so that the planet has a better chance of surviving!') Your children's inescapable questions of 'why' also become easy to answer in this context. If you have trouble answering those questions, chances are you're keeping yourself occupied with what radical American anthropologist David Graeber calls a 'bullshit job', a position even the ones occupying it would admit serves no real purpose. Research shows that in many countries, between twenty and thirty percent of the working population has a bullshit job. And whether you consider these jobs to be a type of victory (a sign that society is so prosperous that even bullshit jobs can be supported) or as a defeat (with people paying and struggling for jobs that don't contribute to anything that really matters), the fact of the matter is that these jobs prove that traditional capitalism is not doing so well, at least in terms of efficiency. Some would even argue that traditional capitalism is in fact or will soon be just another term for inefficiency.

In the VPRO TV show 'Tegenlicht', publicist Rutger Bregman recently argued that a large portion of the existing economic elite has what is essentially a very well-paid bullshit job. He also argued that the opposite of bullshit jobs, i.e. the jobs that actually keep society going and could only be eliminated on pain of total chaos (teachers, nurses, police officers, etc.), are astonishingly poorly paid. "The ones doing the most important work are the ones who are valued and rewarded the least. How crazy is that?"

Let's now return to our main theme, complexity. What young, successful entrepreneurs like Pieter Zwart and Aart van Veller all have in common is that they no longer consider discussion in its own right, the eternal battle between being in favour or against, as a source of intellectual growth, but as the exact opposite: a simplistic model that does not allow (sufficient) room for the complexity of reality.

Zwart expressly argues in favour of making your own opinion completely subservient to the potentially complex messages hidden in data. In doing so, he essentially condemns the act of delivering critique as obsolete. How could you critique data? What point is there in arguing whether a particular type of pressure cooker was or wasn't ordered online 63 times yesterday? The only type of critique that Zwart encourages is critiquing one another's interpretation of the data. In the following citation, he manages to frame his reservations about the current culture of debate quite diplomatically:

"Politicians, citizens, lobbyists and action groups continuously engage in discussion with one another, often in a very time-consuming manner. Often, they're discussing just for discussion's sake. I question that approach."

Perhaps the most thorough critique of the practice of critiquing was issued by Internet pioneer and digital consultant Marleen Stikker during an episode of the Dutch panel show 'Zomergasten'. She made a passionate plea to avoid what she calls the 'easy way', i.e. delivering critique, as much as possible, and use your rebellious energy not for loudly voicing your displeasure but instead for coming up with alternatives – precisely the strategy that young entrepreneur Aart van Veller also advocates. Stikker even went a step further, arguing that delivering critique almost always has the effect opposite of what was intended. She summarised her thinking as follows:

"By critiquing a particular version of reality, you are in fact affirming that reality."

SUPPORT A NEW DEMOCRACY

**or: how outdated colouring in a
ballot really is**

Before we go into all sorts of desired political reformations and how to change political culture so that it is better aligned with digital society, we'd first like to look at a development that rarely gets enough attention, namely the paradoxical development that citizens these days are more likely to be highly educated but are also more likely to have nowhere to put their knowledge to good use in politics. Thanks to digital technology's breakthroughs, we are more equipped than ever to deal with complexity. Due to the constant availability of the Internet and the resulting wealth of economic, cultural, and purely statistical data, we are getting more and more tools to enable realistic, rational decision-making. And yet all the while, the political system still treats us all as primitive pawns who are driven to a specific location to perform one specific act every so often: to colour in a ballot issued by the system. It would be going too far to consider this ritual, this massive one-day migration to polling places, as a semi-dictatorial operation. After all, we willingly head out to vote, and some even get excited about it, although they are in the minority. Even so, this periodical display that some would call a sham no longer does justice to the democratic desires of an increasing portion of our citizens, and to the digital possibilities that have arisen in recent times.

This development puts the rampant rhetoric propagated by vested political parties about 'better education' and 'education as the key to a happier, more prosperous existence' in stark relief. So long as we are living in a society in which the democratic abilities of citizens

are limited to their periodical roundtrip to the polling place and any expansion thereof (such as via referenda) is rejected wholeheartedly, the political realm would seem to pay lip service to the sacred missions and beautiful ideals surrounding the theme of education. However, as soon as we start talking about the concrete results of said education system, namely self-sufficient, competent, informed citizens of the world, these same politicians rush to gag this same (increasingly highly educated) population.

This fundamentally two-faced attitude towards what should be beyond all doubt – the unparalleled potency and necessity of inspiring, high-quality education – has been reflected for some time by the perhaps outrageously low salaries of our country's teachers and other teaching staff. Are the vested powers truly dedicated to ensuring that the entire population is prepared for dealing with the complexity of a digital future? Or do they intend to keep that complexity under wraps at all costs, operating on the notion that by the time that the many widely varied interests clash and things really get complex, people will have long since issued their vote and therefore no longer play a part? Moreover, is this issue the result of some dark plot, or simply the daily reality we're all faced with? In the case of the latter, a systematic failing to take an increasingly highly educated population seriously, this could perhaps be the main reason for the oft-quoted 'civic unrest' (which journalists have been trying to figure out the origins of for years now in their never-ending stream of articles).

Defenders of parliamentary democracy will now argue, not entirely inaccurately, that this is precisely how a parliamentary democracy is supposed to function: spare its citizens from the true complexity of crucial societal decisions and offer them elections as a kind of substitute, in which they will hopefully be able to make a well-informed choice for one of the many groups of professionals (political parties) who aim to tackle said complexity by way of their party programme and their ideology (socialism, liberalism, etc.). It is telling that all of

these common ideologies date back several centuries. It is high time to come up with some new ideologies, or perhaps better yet, to dismiss the idea of set ideologies altogether.

But how realistic is this patronising attitude adopted by the politicians, in our modern day and age where every citizen carries a smartphone that enables them to access relevant information faster than even the president of the United States could have done some thirty years ago? Shouldn't we acknowledge the fact that the roots of the parliamentary democracy as we know it are crumbling as we speak? And that the time has come to inform those who continue to defend it (yes, we know, the system worked perfectly fine for the longest time...), politely but insistently, of the many hairline fractures that are forming and will soon turn into gaping fissures?

Considering all of this, it is telling, perhaps even alarming, that the new government has made sure to put an incredibly quick, decisive end (such speed and decisiveness would serve us well in other areas, such as that of climate change) to even the smallest possibility of more synchronicity between population and politics that was represented by the recent consultative referendum. Apparently, the results of the Ukraine referendum and the referendum on the new intelligence services act were so objectionable to our country's leaders that even that single baby step towards a more inclusive decision-making process had to be dismantled post-haste.

The Dutch government's unwillingness to provide more democratic tools than just colouring in a ballot and the well-known divide between politicians and the population that is the logical result of said unwillingness are not the only hairline fractures that the parliamentary system is currently dealing with. Another aspect that has been laborious and opaque since time immemorial is the translation of election results, of the people's vote, into actual policy – something that should be the ultimate celebration of parliamentary democracy! To put things in traditional terms of 'left' versus 'right', the people

are always distributed along roughly equal lines, which means that the voters' 'message' to politicians is always more or less the same. Defenders of the parliamentary democracy use this immobility, these continuously near-identical election results, as a powerful argument to keep going as we always have, often referring to the corporate world, which wants nothing more than for this same sequence of dance steps, this immobility that is seen by traditional thinkers as the ultimate achievement of stability, to be promoted. And because the corporate world wants nothing more than it wants said stability, and that same corporate world is what earns our society its prosperity, they feel as though it is a foregone conclusion that the way we currently elect our politicians and distribute power should not be tampered with.

Were this reasoning about the blessings of governmental immobility (also known as 'stability') correct, this would mean that voters should never be permitted to exact material change, as it would threaten that blessed stability. Subscribing to the logic of the traditional thinkers, not just in their defence of the current parliamentary system as the bringer of prosperity and social peace but also in their active fight against any corrections to said system, would in turn mean that the whole election circus is an empty ritual that could never effect major change or necessary acceleration.

And that would seem to be a disconcerting observation, but is it really? How disconcerting could something that we see happen daily in front of our very eyes possibly be? Don't the typical election processes and the primarily media-orchestrated electoral mood prove unequivocally that the ritual is indeed empty and meaningless? Don't political parties simply play at disagreeing for a little while and briefly furnish themselves with distinct identities along clearly perceivable lines to stimulate traffic to the ballot box, only to continue on as before once the electoral interest dies down? Only to see every election result as a validation of their outdated thinking?

Putting aside for a second the question of whether this famed stability is actually that desirable, and whether it in fact has the supposed impact on our prosperity (as growing numbers of lower-educated people are living below the poverty line), it seems unavoidable for us to figure out how long we want to continue to see the empty voting ritual as the crowning glory of our democracy. While the decrease in voter turnout is not as dramatic as was once projected, there is still a definite downward trend. Naturally, traditional thinkers try their best to frame this downward trend (sometimes turnout even drops below 50%) more positively. They tend to view the numbers merely as a sign of lack of enthusiasm, not as a rejection out of principle. Taking that view, there is indeed no need to break up or perhaps just reform the current parliamentary system. And considering the fact that the media also have a vested interest in the current system, with its artificial stoking of simple dichotomies and its lack of ambition to share unfiltered complexity with its readers/visitors (after all, that would limit the media's reach and earning capacity by not catering to the public's base desires), the following statement barely requires any imagination.

The vested powers in politics, the corporate world and the media are clinging to centralism, i.e. the idea that reality can be steered from a single location, in spite of the new possibilities and potentially endless branching offered by the Internet.

Our prediction is that said clinging to centralism is ultimately a collision course.

As we've previously stated that we don't like to stick to simple cynicism and as we've already analysed critique as merely confirmation of the existing situation (instead of a valid way to shake said existing situation up), we won't echo the oft-expressed, discontented assertion that the establishment has malicious intentions and/or is only interested in calculatedly pursuing its own interests. Even if that were true, we cannot allow it to overshadow a much more important

question: to what extent is this clinging to centralism, apart from being a potentially malicious or calculated phenomenon, also the result of fear or lack of imagination, i.e. powerlessness? In short, wouldn't both citizens and the political vanguard be much better off freeing themselves from being emotional hostages to mutual grudges?

How crazy is the notion that not the establishment but citizens themselves could be the ones to take the necessary steps for modernising democracy? On the one hand, you might be inclined to think that this is the duty of those who are in power, who are expected to look at least a few steps ahead into the future. On the other hand, how logical is it for the people who join political parties to deliberately strive for careers in politics and want to expand their influence in politics as soon as possible to be the ones who push for democratic modernisation and the involvement of outsiders (or in any case more people than are currently involved) in decision-making processes? How many people, throughout all of human history, have ever been brave enough to put their own (even partial) redundancy on the public agenda? Not many, you can be sure of that!

One thing is certain: as long as we citizens keep avoiding complexity and merely trudge to our local polling stations on demand, reinforcing the illusion that the simple act of colouring in a ballot is the be-all and end-all of our so-called 'democratic duty', nothing will ever change. In the meantime, the political elite will continue to feel validated in its view that asking citizens for their vote every now and then is the utmost contribution that could be asked of them, legitimising their efforts to keep complexity swept under the rug, away from the public eye, and thus allow us to continue to live our carefree, comfortable lives – so that the population will continue to be satisfied with the centralistic, automatic tendencies that characterise the way the country is run, which we feel are symptomatic of a collision course.

But how can we adjust said collision course?

Naturally, we are not the only ones to have noticed that our current democratic format is merely an empty ritual, and who have identified the growing friction between the technological possibilities of online debate with groups of various sizes to come up with suitable solutions on the one hand, and the ideological rear-guard actions that still make up the lion's share of political movements in this country. Professor in public administration at Tilburg University, Pieter Tops, could be called a veteran on the topic of how to rejuvenate our democracy. In his essay 'The new civic work', Tops and several of his co-workers argue that while the notion that you're on your own, working towards a rank or position that you will achieve entirely on your own merit, without any outside help whatsoever, and that you are thus entitled to said rank or position, is still a common, leading notion in our society (as it should be!), that notion (referred to in academic spheres as the meritocracy) has also gone too far.

What does he mean by that, 'too far'?

Tops means that both individuals and companies as well as the government seem completely uninterested in interplay, in mutual influencing. As a result, valuable achievements are often claimed by a single person or organisation, and the often-substantial role played by others (either directly or in the lead-up) is unjustly forgotten. This in turn means that instead of recognising the interplay and acknowledging it as an essential element of any development or achievement, we get stuck in claims about who did what, and how much of a rise on the social ladder their achievement warrants, how much additional status and remuneration they should get. Tops feels that in doing things like this, we are not doing ourselves justice. Even in a democracy (a sustainable form thereof, mind you), this interplay is of crucial importance. And Tops asserts that our elections, the incidental appearance of that empty electoral ritual, are insufficient for enabling the kind of conversation we need regarding the interplay.

Like we are, Tops is looking for a solution to breathe new life into this kind of interplay – but not as part of the parliamentary system, as in the past. Instead, he assigns self-employed professionals a prominent role in this process.

“Energy cooperatives, support networks for self-employed professionals, working projects, care facilities, local neighbourhood communities, etc. (...) The power of community. (...) These types of initiatives foster important public values and are wanting to get involved in decision-making on public values. They are the result of a highly successful societal project, namely the emancipation and meritocratisation of society, the ideals of the sixties and seventies of the previous century. While class mobility used to be very limited, the majority of Dutch citizens are now highly educated, opinionated, self-aware citizens. We want and claim space to act and take the creation of societal values that are of public interest into our own hands. And we want to be given recognition for being partly responsible for producing these public values.”

We feel that Tops is hitting the nail on the head when he argues that the government should start actively supporting the creation and flourishing of such initiatives financially, judicially and infrastructurally – so that valuable conversation partners arise all throughout the country, who not only make promises and plans briefly to effect an upsurge in voters’ goodwill, but are permanently invested in matters such as sustainable energy, truly caring healthcare, social security and sustainable income. In fact, Tops argues (and we wholeheartedly agree) that if you were to take all of the energy currently being put into party formation along ideological lines, internal arguments and political conflict and instead invest all of it into getting initiatives like the ones we mentioned previously off the ground, this would result in a sudden, much-needed, confidence-inspiring breath of fresh air wafting through our struggling democracy. Not only will the political realm be able to feel at ease outsourcing certain matters (making it less prone to give into its centralistic reflexes) in the

knowledge that organisations full of citizen power are more than capable enough of taking over, but citizens in turn will be less inclined to stand cynically and idly by and more inclined to add their own knowledge and expertise to such organisations, to contribute in a very personal, unique way to what Tops calls 'public values'. This certainly wouldn't harm the country's Gross National Happiness – quite the contrary, we would argue! We would finally be benefiting from the potential of our citizens, which currently evaporates days after every election once all of the complicated issues end up (after another near-identical election result) in the hands of the same bureaucratic system. In short, we feel that this analysis results necessarily in the following argument:

To revitalise our democracy, we have to have decentralisation of power and have to shift decision-making powers to cooperatives and other local citizen initiatives that are much smaller and much more efficient at creating 'public values' in aspects like healthcare, sustainable energy and public spaces."

We get that this isn't a particularly sexy-sounding argument (which is probably at least part of the reason why these kinds of overhauls, while necessary, are often very slow and laborious in the making). Cynics will immediately contest whether small-scale citizen organisations would in fact create better 'public values' than, for example, your average municipality (which, in spite of its professional system of civil servants and extensive powers, always remains a kind of subsection or figurehead of the central government in The Hague in our eyes). Luckily, the answer to this cynical question is easy. Citizens are better informed regarding local sentiments, characteristics and peculiarities, so that important 'public values' are no longer roughly imposed on the public based on models copied directly from The Hague. This will make people's immediate environment more recognisable and personal (for example, think of the floorplan of a local playground and the maintenance of public green areas), positively contributing to a sense of identity and belonging. On top of that,

even if citizens were to feel any discontent with the performance of such citizen organisations, they wouldn't need to try to get through to someone in the system, but could simply talk to someone who actually knows the area, through short lines of communication, in a familiar environment. This would largely eliminate the current breeding ground for simplistic us-versus-them thinking and allow complexity (even of simple matters like the floorplan for a local playground) to penetrate even to the most pinpointed, hyperlocal level, allowing issues to be solved right there where they are located in the first place. (Just consider the powerlessness the government recently demonstrated in dealing with the consequences of gas extraction in the province of Groningen, the acute sense of distance and removal between the national government's decision-making and the frustration experienced by local victims and residents. Only one conclusion makes sense: we need less centralism, and more local intelligence!)

Finally, let's turn to the topic of the referendum.

We feel that the referendum is the most logical way to expand democracy, particularly considering the growing influence of the on-line dimension. Referenda feed conversation and interplay, which we've previously established as preconditions for healthy democracy. However, we do recognise that if referenda are introduced 'cold', i.e. in isolation and without any preparation, they can also do damage. As such, it is important for the government to accompany referenda with massive online campaigns, drastically intensifying the information provision for matters that will be put up for referendum in the near future. These campaigns should of course not feel patronising, and should not obscure the complexity of sometimes difficult and sensitive issues (like immigration), but instead shine a light on said complexity. This allows citizens to decide for themselves how elaborately they would like to be informed. In short, you have to invest in the referendum properly if you want to turn it into a successful democratic instrument, in intellectual,

logistical, and information-technical terms, and stick to your guns when voter turnout drops to a mere twenty or thirty percent; it's better to see the properly substantiated, informed choice of a smaller share of the population than the uninformed, emotional choice of a larger share.

Looking back at the fate of referenda in the Netherlands thus far, you cannot help but shake your head despairingly. They have been so ill-prepared by the government, and the consequences of the results have been so nonchalantly underestimated (for example, the way in which the results of the referendum on the European Constitution continues to cause chagrin amongst the electorate says it all).

Minister Brinkhorst's 2005 statement that we would not 'be able to keep the lights on' if the Dutch people were to vote against the European Constitution showcases the shameful way in which the elite have treated the referendum. The statement was purely an attempt to strike fear into people's hearts. Because there was no conversation or interplay between the elite and the general population regarding the matter of the EU at the time, the government panicked and made a hatchet job of it all.

It goes without saying that even properly prepared referenda like the ones we are suggesting could produce unexpected results that may well be disagreeable to the elite. They could also delay or even sabotage plans that are already in the pipeline and are almost unanimously seen as desirable and/or necessary by the political realm. However, should those facts be used as reasons not to utilise the referendum? Certainly not. In a highly educated online society like ours, fear of wrong decisions should not prevail. Instead, we should trust that there are always new learning curves to be explored, and that avoiding those curves, blocking conversation and interplay, is much, much more harmful than the occasional delay or obstruction here or there.

Finally, one more thing about how to deal with the odd circus act that is our public elections, enveloping us every now and then like an oddly predictable whirlwind.

Considering Marleen Stikker's arguments (which we quoted in the previous chapter), casting a protest vote, i.e. voting for an anti-establishment political party, is a completely pointless act. In fact, it might even reinforce the existing political system you so abhor.

How, then, should we act?

We feel that the taboo on not voting should be lifted. It should have stopped being considered as a capital offence a long time ago. In fact, the contribution you make to society in the interim, between elections, preferably to local organisations (as we argued in this chapter), is so much more important for both yourself and the vitality of our democracy than your vote could ever be.

Just like how paid work is not the only way to increase the spiritual and material prosperity of a nation, voting is not the only way to serve democracy.

BECOME THE PRESIDENT OF YOUR OWN DATA REPUBLIC

**or: how decentralisation will
get you your own palace and
formal powers**

If there is one thing we will miss in the future, it will be the convenience of simply projecting our dissatisfaction onto one or more inherently malicious individuals or institutions in power and blaming them for our state of dissatisfaction.

We may well soon be finding out how many advantages there were to being powerless, to having licence to complain freely about those in power due to our own chronic lack of influence, or to throwing in the towel while exclaiming that we simply cannot do anything about something or other being decided so far away, using the immense distance as the ultimate alibi.

Being powerless. Complaining. Washing your hands of all responsibility.

Before long, we could be looking back with a measure of regret, longing for the good old days in which we couldn't be expected to take control of our own destiny. The pleasant, comfortable feeling of having little to no personal responsibility and feeling 'justified' in cursing or accusing the establishment to your heart's content is a luxury that traditional capitalism was able to award a select group of citizens in its heyday. However, this rather randomly distributed gift is now disintegrating. Ever larger numbers of possibilities for directly influencing your own situation via technology and digital networks will be available to you via your smartphone, putting all of these questions on your plate: which partner do I choose? Which company am I going to work for? How do I want to organise my stability? Where am I staying tonight?

What energy source or provider do I want to use? And so on, and so forth...

Whether you like it or not, the room you have to simply be a consumer, passively using things that were produced or finished elsewhere under unfair (or much less fair) circumstances, will decrease drastically.

For example, what use is there in protesting against a particular commercial policy if you have the option of contributing to fairer relationships between makers and buyers via a fair-trade network? What use is there in railing against the government's weak climate change policies if you have the option of living as climate-neutral a life as possible? What use is there in complaining about educational policy if you have the option of obtaining nearly unlimited access to new knowledge if you were sufficiently inclined. This isn't to say that openly protesting injustice will be a thing of the past, but we do live in a world where the decisive influence regarding such political and ethical matters will no longer be exercised indirectly, via governments and established institutions – instead, it will be exercised directly, by you! The drastic expansion of your direct influence (your power, as it were) that we predict for the coming years will be the result of a single, irrepressible development...

Decentralisation.

Whole libraries have been filled regarding so-called 'sharing economy' and the impending power shift from the centre to the peripheries, but most of what has been written is rather inaccessible and thus uninspiring discourse at a macro-level. We'd like to focus instead on what decentralisation would mean for you as an individual. Will it result in an irritating exercise that has your smartphone buzzing non-stop with matters that you don't even want to get involved in, and that you'd prefer to cast back to the institutions that

currently (profess to) be in charge of them? In other words, are you old-fashioned and caught off-guard by the impending complexity, the new power coming your way? Or are you welcoming the opportunity to get to determine which work, food, leisure, insurance and payment networks you want to participate in, and cannot wait to shape your life in a way that actually suits you?

Regardless of which of the two profiles you identify with more, it's guaranteed that the possibilities for easily forming networks of your own (or joining them with just a few clicks) will be increasing in the coming years, and that new generations for whom the pre-Internet age is mere lore from the past will more naturally embrace these opportunities than previous generations did. Thanks to decentralised block-chain technology, these digital networks will quickly become safer and more reliable.

With such a future for our networks fast approaching, more and more critical questions that you might want to ask the world will be bounced right back to you by said world with the following addition: "If you feel this thing is so important, or want to change it so badly, why don't you join network X, Y or Z that acts in accordance with your convictions?"

When this network future will have achieved its full momentum and how far the networks' influence will reach remains to be seen. But what is certain is that the established institutions – which we continue to look to via mass media, awaiting what kind of policy and what kinds of decisions they will be using to steer the future – will lose influence. Not just because their performance is sub-standard, or because they are seen as fundamentally unreliable, but simply because 'knowledge' and 'wisdom' can be organised via networks from here on out, which means such institutions and their often slow, opaque procedures are doomed to be left behind as flotsam in the fast-paced river of the network society.

There should be political debate on how to (re)define the role of the government in our emerging network society. We would suggest that the government focus more on its facilitating duties, and less on its moralistic ones. Let it not serve as a childish factory of complaints regarding fake news and social media that presents the Internet as a kind of evil virus that should be combatted and curtailed. Let it instead focus on improving the quality of said Internet, such as by legislating proper privacy rights, ensuring safer data storage, updating copyright and trademark law to facilitate information exchange, and setting up a properly functioning e-democracy.

One of the most intriguing promises of the network society is that the so-called black holes of society (such as banks, insurance companies, credit rating agencies, pension funds, planning agencies, care administration offices, social media giants, benefits payment organisations – in short, everything that is left to its own devices in secure locations or tall buildings behind Plexiglas partitions) will eventually become superfluous, replaced by fully verifiable networks that will operate transparently, according to openly acknowledged principles or core values. These core values are ideological in nature and will define the 'colour' or character of the network, which people will feel a greater or lesser degree of connection to and which they can then indicate via a half-dozen clicks by choosing to join a particular network.

We predict that in this network society, the distinction between what we call the 'haves' and 'have-nots' will also be drastically reduced. Whereas we currently remain artificially tied to the economic and political backbones of the corporate world and the political realm, new networks soon will arise in which shared ownership is a simple matter of course.

X number of years from now, you'll be sharing your car in a particular vehicle network. Aside from the earnings you get from the network for the hours or half-/whole-day shifts that others in the network use your car, we predict that in such a model of shared ownership,

you will get more than a bit of pocket money here and there for such occasional lending instances; you'll also be paid for the simple fact that you are willing to make your car available to that particular network, becoming shared owner of the entire network and thus entitled to a small share of the total profits. This shared ownership model will pave the way for people to have incomes that are drawn not from just one or two sources, but from as many as ten or twenty – because the same principles that apply to your car can also apply to your bike, your house, your gardening tools, your vacuum cleaner, your parking spot and many other things.

From our current perspective, the idea of having not one or two sources of income but dozens seems unwelcome, or at least unnecessarily complicated. However, block chain and its increasingly refined, reliable financial software will eliminate any hassle in that department. Moreover, your earning capacity will become much broader and much more diversified: in addition to earning a particular monthly amount with your main job, you'll also obtain micro-revenue from a range of other short-term, occasional activities.

Society will shift from being strictly divided into pigeonholes or departments where people 'are' their profession to a more fluid system where people 'are' what they do, including any activities they might engage in outside of their main employment relationship or core competencies. In short, the thing that we all rationally know but have not found an organisational solution for yet (namely the fact that not just your professional activities have value, but your societal contributions as well) will be reflected by your revenue streams within the foreseeable future. The capillaries of the financial system will branch out down to the smallest possible level, and thus reflect your actual contribution (instead of the promised or prospected contribution) more than ever.

As for why we long so for this financial finetuning... Well, because it has the potential to right a decades-long imbalance regarding paid

and unpaid labour. The act of driving a disabled neighbour of yours to and from their bridge club every week can suddenly be remunerated based on fair, real added value. It would also make the construction of ideal networks a lot easier. Say you really enjoy ferrying disabled people to and from wherever they need to go. In such a financially finetuned world, you could even make this into your main activity, and earn a living wage doing so.

Talk about progress!

So, are we saying that decentralisation only has upsides? Well... Yes, we really do think so. However, that doesn't mean that the fruits of the system will magically, automatically be available to everyone. There is a way for you to mess it up, spoil your own fun and your own chances to really be appreciated for the actual added value you offer, and be paid a living wage for it to boot.

The way to mess it up would be to hand your own data – which we will be referring to from now on as your 'personal data capital' – to an unknown third party. In other words, by handing data about who you are, where you are and what you do to a company or institution that you have no insight into, no influence over, and of which you cannot know whether it is managed by 'the good guys' or not. In doing so, you may well rob yourself of your most valuable possession – a possession that cannot be expressed in financial terms just yet, but will soon make up a substantial portion of your available funds.

We recommend being more conscious about how you treat your personal data capital, and becoming president of your own data republic!

There are two main scenarios that will eventually result in you having ownership (being president) of your own data capital. The first is an 'active' scenario in which you decide to actively stop giving your data capital away freely to platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other large capitalist networks. You then start carry-

ing out the same kinds of activities on smaller, less well-known platforms with much stricter privacy regulations, or if you like, you could even stop being a part of social media entirely. In that case, you'll be able to rest assured that no one is able to use your data for profit (a wonderful feeling!), but at the same time you'll have to accept the fact that you are decreasing your own digital impact, your visibility (perhaps a less wonderful feeling).

There is also a passive scenario. How soon that scenario will become possible remains up for debate, but it's certain that there will one day be networks that take the initiative and come knocking at your door to tell you that they are interested in your data. Let's stick to our example of car sharing. It's only a matter of time before car share networks will start paying you for the data regarding your driving and non-driving periods, because they can then use that data to determine how valuable your car could be for their network, whether it is available at peak times or not. Soon, countless networks will be interested to hear about whether you have made valuable contributions to development processes or the creation of actual products, and they will be willing to pay you to be allowed to keep a permanent eye on the kind of work you do.

These simple examples show that it will be essential for you to be the owner of your own data capital in the near future. If you are not and your data is owned by a third party, said third party will reap the profits of said data without a care for you or your wellbeing.

How come this development, which will soon be upon us, still gets so little attention, and has not yet been brought to the awareness of the vast majority of people? This is because the establishment have a stake in keeping control of your data capital in their bunkers and air-conditioned server rooms – not just a material stake (i.e. collecting the earnings of your data capital), but also an immaterial one (i.e. getting to determine what kinds of products are presented to you). And the establishment has enough cash on hand to invest in adver-

tising campaigns and lobbyists who will swear up and down that they want only the very best for you – which, coincidentally, always turns out to be a product of some kind, such as a vacuum cleaner, deodorant, book or decorative plant, which your personal data indicated you may be in need of at that specific moment in time.

Just like a select group of Tesla drivers are preparing for electric transportation of the future, a small vanguard of tenacious nerds and digital whizz kids has begun keeping guard over their own data capital. Unfortunately, most people are not yet sufficiently aware of the tension between the interests of the corporate world and the government on the one hand, and their own personal interests on the other hand. Moreover, they remain under the incorrect illusion that they're 'not interesting enough', which would mean that their data capital is thus of little to no value. As such, they don't think twice about putting their fates into the hands of existing powers.

However, we would be doing you a disservice in characterising the tech giants as villains.

For example: precisely because digital awareness is sky-high amongst Google employees and because they are aware of the global influence of the company and of their own network power to influence Google's overall course, there have been successful campaigns in the past in which employees forced Google to stop developing certain forms of artificial intelligences that could have ended up being used for military purposes, with obviously catastrophic consequences. It's very possible that these tech giants, which as of yet still form a united front when facing the outside world, may soon be plagued by internal differences of opinion that cause valued, dissatisfied employees to walk out on their employers and start competing businesses of their own (please, be our guest!).

Once again, decentralisation would do us all a world of good!

EMBRACE ROBOTISATION

**or: the as-of-yet unexplored art
of not shying away from new
kinds of freedom**

The word 'nostalgic' used to be a neutral descriptor of someone whose thoughts would constantly drift to the past, under the assumption that things were better back then. Such nostalgia would usually prompt people to give the individual a sympathetic pat on the back, while perhaps shaking their heads with something akin to pity. Nostalgic individuals were seen as harmless, but a bit lost. How things have changed! Since Donald Trump used the slogan 'Make America great again' to appeal to voters' desire to restore the (perhaps imagined) faded prestige of their country, the word 'nostalgia' has taken on an accusatory, bitter aftertaste. To say that someone is nostalgic (like Trump) nowadays almost always also implies some kind of accusation – that this person is deliberately making the past out to be amazing so as to venerate it or actively make an example of it, when that idealised, sunny version of the past never actually existed in the first place. Whereas they used to be seen as sentimental people in need of help, nostalgics are now seen as malicious manipulators. They are in the business of selling an illusion, an impossible (and perhaps harmful) journey in time, heading back the wrong way.

The wrong way, those of us who believe in progress would say, because we should be focusing on the future instead of the past. Climate change, polluted oceans, ageing populations, poverty, immigration, biodiversity, the rise of nationalism – all of these issues are scrambling for our attention. You'd have to be crazy not to feel the urge to immediately put all of the latest technologies to use in

fighting these issues, and instead waste time looking back over your shoulder at times long gone.

Moreover, how nice would it actually be to be catapulted, say, forty years back in time? To a time where there was no Internet, only static television screens for most of the day until the first evening broadcast, and phones still had rotary dials.

Wouldn't we be bored half to death, biting our nails in maddening impatience? In short, isn't nostalgia simply a despicable character trait that presents us with a sweet dream that would in fact turn out to be a nightmare if it ever came true? And if that isn't bad enough, that also prevents us from creating a promising future for our children? There is no real way to predict whether such a journey back in time would make us happy or not. But one thing is certain: compared to nowadays, our range of choices (in any matter) would be much more limited. Depending on your personality, you might welcome or abhor such a drastic reduction in options, and want to quickly return to the present day or spend forever in the blissful past. In short, the core question is this:

How freeing or limiting is it to have fewer options, to experience limited complexity?

Standing as we are at the threshold of the next age in which objects will be able to 'see' one another using sensors, devices like cars will be operating themselves and all sorts of clever robots will be carrying out tasks that are currently still performed by people, it will only become more tempting to give into nostalgia. Soon, the bygone era in which the majority of people still had to 'work for a living', perform manual labour in exchange for a monthly pay check, will become idealised as a blessedly simple, uncomplicated state. Isn't it much more adventurous to actually drive your car, making all of the minute adjustments to ferry yourself safely through busy rush-hour traffic, than to sit back in your luxury (non-driver's) seat and let your

car do the work, only having to get in and out (through doors that open automatically or at the mere press of a finger scan button)?

How can you ever be a hero when robots do all of the work for you?

It's no stretch of the imagination to suppose that soon, nostalgic amusement parks in which you get to experience life in the past, with all of its repetitive labour and long waits, will become all the rage. Their advertisements will revolve around the charms of simplicity, the pleasure and ease of mind experienced when presented with very limited options. They will attempt to bring us something that will no longer be attainable in the modern network society, even if you were to travel to the North Pole or the very centre of Antarctica – namely isolation.

All in all, considering the oncoming developments of rapid 5G Internet, the redundancy of much manual labour and the rise of intelligent systems that will calculate the ideal solution for us without even involving us, nostalgia is an understandable reaction and a tempting emotion to find comfort in. However, it will never be more than a pleasant form of mourning for what's lost.

The real challenge is to find your way in the super-connected society of the future, a world where robots will at the very least be taking over countless small daily tasks, if not taking over entirely. How does one deal with that kind of environment? Where does one look for a sense of fulfilment if almost everything is being done for you and being decided for you?

Let's try to at least keep from making one mistake, namely the assumption that robotisation will automatically improve things for humanity and should be ushered in sooner rather than later. Just like no one ever asked for the Internet to arise, no one is demanding that their existence be robotised as much as possible. The reason robots will be occupying such a dominant role in society is not because we

think this will make us euphorically happy. We have no way of knowing that just yet!

It's because robotisation supports an abstract promise of ease and efficiency, of less worrying, less hassle. Things that required us to exert ourselves or plan them out carefully up until now, such as vacuuming, mowing the lawn, or making love, to name but a few, will soon occur automatically, with hardly any effort, by or with the aid of robots.

As such, robotisation is inevitable, and the consequences it will have are as of yet unknown, but one thing we can know for sure; it will save us mental and physical effort, thus creating more freedom for us.

The logical next question to ask would be what we might then use this newly freed up mental and physical effort for.

Once again, for the very last time, allow us to return to the central theme of this book: complexity. If, in this impending robotised future, you were to make your decisions too slowly or too half-heartedly, i.e. not be strict enough in deciding which debate you want to be a part of, which topic you want to become an expert in and accept the complexity of, you'll soon be overwhelmed by the much more threatening complexity of new (additional) freedom, making you vulnerable to nostalgic escapism, or being fully overtaken by robotic services with a vegetative life without purpose, challenge or emotional upheaval of any kind as a result.

Naturally, self-employed professionals who are already used to steering themselves in the right direction and making their own decisions on a regular basis are best prepared for finding their way in our soon-to-be increasingly robotised society. They are already at least somewhat adept at formulating personal and professional mission statements, and then deciding for themselves which working rhythm, which lifestyle and which decisions would align with said

missions. This is just one more reason why self-employed professionals should not be treated like pariahs, like unwelcome disrupters of the system, but like our role models for the future.

It remains unclear as of right now how the economy will change under the influence of robotisation, but what does seem certain is that immaterial objectives like fulfilment, feeling good, having fun in life, and so on will become proportionally more important compared to material objectives like money, food and a roof over your head. After all, material goods will be held in common more and more, and the complexity of our increased freedom (partly due to robots) will create an enormous demand for those who know the secret to life fulfillment, creativity and what could be termed 'brain fitness'.

While hippie culture with its characteristic music genre and clothing style came and went in the 1960s, we predict that as traditional capitalism gets put more and more on the back burner, there will be a shift towards immaterial values like the ones that prevailed in the hippie age: being in the moment, being kind to one another, peace on earth, and so on.

This whole book is intended (as its title would suggest) to convince people that new technologies including robots may not necessarily be perfect, but that they can create amazing opportunities for us to become who we really want to be. More than ever before in human history, technological progress is enabling us to choose our own destinies, regardless of our historical, financial and familial ties. We feel that this prospect is definitely something to get excited about. The last thing we would want is for the nostalgic approach we described (and perhaps ridiculed a bit) above to gain momentum, giving new life to old dogmas about 'how life should be'. That's the opposite of what we want.

Now that we are no longer obligated to continue existing relationships and traditions, deeply philosophical questions like 'who do I

want to be?' and 'who do I definitely not want to be?' have become a lot more urgent and no longer theoretical in nature for a lot of people.

Whereas 'working on yourself' used to sound a little scary and therapist-like, the many achievements of our technologically advanced society have now made it possible and in fact ensured that this will increasingly become the main thing we occupy ourselves with throughout our existence on this planet. We feel that the complexity that this inevitably entails and that many people are uncomfortable with is a godsend, a wonderful assignment, a beautiful challenge – hence the title of this book, 'Things are getting complicated – hurray!'

In this book, we outlined a wide range of forces and developments within the political realm, the corporate world and ourselves that are doing their utmost to keep us from becoming or even coming close to becoming 'who we want to be', and provided suggestions on how to deal with the complexity that you will inevitably be faced with on your road to self-actualisation.

We've done so in the hope that you will be able to translate the (technological) wealth coming our way into wealth of your own, of any kind – and not simply be overpowered by it.

AFTERWORD

Technology is the societal and economic force driving our future. It seems as though new inventions are being developed every single day, each and every one of them as impactful on society at large as the wheel and the steam engine once were. The consequences of all of these new algorithms, data streams and technologies are huge. Privacy, labour and labour forms, our (global) living environment, the existential mandate of large organisations, and our future well-being are all tilting. Things will never again be the way they were.

As an entrepreneur, aside from working on the operational side of my business, I spend time daily on keeping up with the societal and technological developments all around us, trying to understand them, and then trying to predict what kind of impact they will have on our organisation. To put it simply, changes to your organisation have become a constant in and of themselves. Back when I founded Seats2meet with my co-founder Marielle Sijgers back in 2007, terms like coworking, self-employed professional, social capital and the network society didn't even exist yet. Google had only been a listed company for a few years, YouTube had been around for only two, and Ali Baba was just a fairytale character. We conjured up the concept of 'social capital', seemingly out of thin air, as part of our business model.

As we define it, social capital is the willingness of our visitors to share knowledge with others as a means to pay for a place to work. This knowledge-sharing is done with people that you don't know, but who are relevant to you at a particular moment in time. Nowadays, we have our own Artificial Intelligence Algorithm, the Serendipity Machine, for facilitating this process.

This 'machine' helps you have unexpected but relevant, real-life meetings with strangers. As such, there is a very special, interesting dynamic at our physical Seats2meet branches – a dynamic that anyone can tap into to improve themselves. For example, this knowledge-sharing and forging of new contacts may help you get involved in a new start-up or project, the writing of a book, the founding of a new school or an environmentally friendly cosmetics range. This way, coworking is no longer an aim in and of itself, but an enabler, a way to get to a higher aim: value creation 3.0.

Here's how it works. You book a workspace online, but instead of paying money, you offer up a piece of data from your own data wallet, our Passport. You tell people who you are, what knowledge you have to offer and what you're working on this week. Our algorithm will then match you to relevant people, events and articles. After that, it's up to you to do something with what you've been given. As such, our locations are great places to host presentations, to organise events or just to be around. We make a living renting out these commercial meeting rooms and event spaces, bringing things full circle and ensuring a nice balance between social and monetary capital. We turn our events into truly special occasions where you can experience unexpected but relevant meetings with strangers. At a meta level (i.e. a level at which things can't be traced back to individual people), we are able to observe which topics, issues and themes are currently being explored by our network, so that we can pinpoint certain trends and then organise events in collaboration with said network around two months in advance, regarding themes that will become relevant around two months later. We've thus transformed 'supply and demand' into 'supply as a result of a latent demand'.

Companies like Achmea and ASR Bank, as well as local schools, theatres, libraries and movie theatres have embraced our concept and become licensees. The concept also includes our Seats2meet Flagship Stores and a network of smaller locations (a good 200 of them at the time of writing, spread across 28 countries).

All of the processes for booking rooms and chairs are fully digitalised and largely real-time, offered to our members in customisable dashboards. This enables organisations to act quickly, and executive responsibility is entirely in the hands of our members. There is no need for us to manage or direct things, because we've enabled people to direct themselves! As such, our core team is small, because many of the traditional activities have been outsourced to our network. We don't have a marketing, sales, PR or procurement department. In the future, we expect to decentralise our activities even further, incorporating methods such as shared ownership, which we already touched upon in this book.

In fact, this very book also came about as a result of our network. I met fellow author Hans van Willigenburg during the early stages of Seats2meet. He wrote a beautiful article about us back in 2010 in which he accurately described our network organisation as 'the Church of Work'. We kept in touch since then, and came together at one point to discuss our shared desire to interpret the rapid changes our society is constantly undergoing and make them more accessible to others. This book is the end result of that meeting, and I would hereby like to thank Hans for engaging in this mental exercise with me. Other network partners were also involved in the creation of this book. Their names and contributions can be found on the companion website to the book, www.hoeraingewikkeld.nl.

Ronald van den Hoff

Sources and literature

If you want to keep reading about any of the topics we touched upon or want to know which sources we used or were inspired by, go to www.hoeraingewikkeld.nl.

THINGS ARE GETTING COMPLICATED – HURRAY!

Dealing with the complexity of the future

was published by Stichting Society 3.0 in collaboration with
Van Lindonk & De Bres

www.society30.nl

ISBN 978-9-079-67958-4

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Design: Akimoto

Cover photo: Maria Averina

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