Stay small

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Every day, when the kids are in bed, my wife Victorine and I watch a series on Netflix. As small children we enjoy the stories, one episode every day. And it always strikes us how great some series are that come from very small countries. Belgian series, for example *De Ridder*, or from Denmark *Follow the Money*, which we are watching now: series that excel with both great storylines and acting. If we have watched the last episode of such a production that was made with a lot of love and attention to detail and relatively little money and if the new series we are about to watch is, again, a (mainstream) American production (there are most of them), then we notice time and time again how normal everything is again, how "mediocre". An American blockbuster series only becomes special if there is something special in the casting, such as a European protagonist, such as the Welshman Tom Ellis in *Lucifer,* or a special location, for example in Europe or Africa. Incidentally, the American series *Breaking Bad* was an exception, as far as we are concerned it was of a smaller country class!

Still, I think we can learn something from this: if a small country, such as Belgium (less than 12 million inhabitants) or Denmark (less than 6 million inhabitants), can make such beautiful productions with relatively few inhabitants, then it is important to deduce from this that scaling up does not by definition lead to better and more special results. We have also seen beautiful series from Iceland, while the country has less than 400,000 inhabitants. Countries that are easily overtaken by metropolises in terms of population, but that are rarely seen precisely because of their relatively small size.

In biology, too, it seems to hold that organisms either remain small, flexible and adaptive, or become relatively strong and invulnerable by growing very large. Denmark vs America, or Iceland vs China. A single-celled

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animal, such as the slipper animalcule, has a very strong strategy, and although we have run into serious problems worldwide with our large-scale systems worldwide, we humans have been able to survive beyond expectations, precisely because of large and complex systems. This is exactly the paradox: systems are useful and terrible, necessary and dangerous. Large organizations that increasingly impose rules and freedom restrictions on their employees – HRO principles, for example – against small SMEs, who sometimes see opportunities to keep their lives together. HRO stands for high reliability organization, such as nuclear power plants, aviation services or medical specialist care. Maximum control is needed and free play space is minimal. This is how you create the "elephants" of human systems: large, unwieldy but extremely reliable. Of course one can try to maintain resilience, but an elephant will never achieve the flexibility of a mouse, let alone that of a single-celled organism.

I am so glad that there are still small countries with creative, resilient artists. As for the language, subtitling (Dutch or English) is better than dubbing, in my opinion actors come into their own most naturally in their own language, or even dialect (Danish, Cornish, Welsh or Frisian). But here too we encounter a paradox, because Netflix is large - it is actually an HRO organization - we can enjoy so many small-scale productions. We cannot do without (some) large controlled organizations, but above all we need resilient and creative artists and SMEs from smaller communities, who are flexible and can change quickly, hence this plea. So thank you, artists from countries like Scandinavia, Benelux and Great Britain, to many more beautiful Netflix evenings with Victorine, whom I enjoy and with whom I hope to stay small for a long time to come!