Low literacy (1)

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Last Monday evening I went to a beautiful Theatre piece "Low literacy" organized by the Windesheim University research group "mental health and society" of about low literacy. At 6:30 pm my wife and I drove together with our thirteen-year-old daughter to Hedon theatre in Zwolle (the Netherlands, a theatre where I performed with my then band Jim Rensson & the Crew many lives ago (early 80s).

It was a beautiful evening! After a short introduction by researcher Dr Merel van Mansom, in which she noted that 18% of the Dutch population is low literate (which amounts to almost 25,000 inhabitants in the city of Zwolle alone), four actors came on stage, each of whom acted as a low-literate (cleaning lady, mechanic, home care, without a profession with the daily care for a woman after a stroke), or as a highly literate professional (GP, teacher, technology team leader, debt counsellor).

In the communication between professionals and low-literate people, the complicated written (and digital) system reality was particularly striking, in which people have to initiate requests for help or other forms of communication. For example, the prescription is digitally put online at the pharmacy, so you can authorize it digitally and then pick it up. Although low literate people have a good understanding of their own work and environment, with the best intentions the professionals communicate incomprehensibly to the low literate (low literacy and IQ are different things).

Our world is enormously complex, with enormously complicated (digital or societal) systems – often initially intended to make it easier – that need to be properly secured, made GDPR-proof and also legally sealed for a literate society is already complicated. For example, to put a check mark in a project management system, you must first enter a double authorization code on your telephone. While most illiterate people can easily read short sentences and navigate the (algorithmized) internet, they often struggle with rigid government and security systems and industry jargon. This also applies to less illiterate people. Even our Dutch Prime Minister was accused of preferring an old Nokia and simple telecommunications services to highly secured government services (instead he emailed and texted via Gmail and WhatsApp). If we are thinking, acting and access to information becomes dependent on top-down systems, users will increasingly form the "weakest" link. Increasingly this will also apply to highly skilled professionals. Wooden ships, iron people, iron systems, more relatively "low literacy", increasingly independent of Social Economic Status, let alone Intelligence....

For me, the main conclusion was that full social accessibility has become too complicated. As far as I'm concerned, we don't really need to apply lifelong literacy to low-literate people, no matter how attractive they are as a business model. Instead, we must curb the proliferation of increasingly complex systems with double (or even triple) authorization and lots of jargon. I therefore think that 18% low literacy is simply too little, only when 50% of the people belong to the low-literate group we may finally throw these systems aside. Where is sustainable living in human connection? If this is supposedly illiteracy, and our systems are so complex, it seems rather to indicate that we have drastically misplaced our priorities for people and their usefulness. All the more poignant that the so-called illiterate – just like in the play – do exactly that most important work, roll up their sleeves and do not hide behind weighty titles, which according to David Graeber in the book *BullShit Jobs* mainly that the "professional" actually contributes less. Low literacy is (still) more common among people with a low socio-economic status (SES) than among people with a higher SES. You can increase SES by educating everyone as high as possible (to a high SES "bullshit job"). Perhaps it would be better to have drastically more appreciation (in terms of status: pay and social standing) for the real work jobs (Graeber calls it the "shit" jobs). In short, a wonderful evening, with top players, and a beautiful design of applied scientific action research!

Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory.* New York: Simon & Schuster.