

Creep

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

Professor of Brain and Technology, Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Deventer, Netherlands

The lockdown is almost over in the Netherlands! I catch myself having that paradoxical feeling again, that I don't feel like doing something anymore, when I've been looking forward to it for so long. It's like that famous fairy-tale bird in her golden cage, who dreamed of freedom for many years, of flying with those beautiful variegated birds, over the hills that she could just see through the palace window. At last, the bird is quite old, the princess - who has now become queen, busy with her many duties - forgets to close the cage door. She flies out of her cage, through the window, into that beautiful dream world, only to realize ... that she doesn't belong here. She starts whistling, a Radiohead song: "But I'm a creep, I'm a weirdo, What the hell am I doing here? I don't belong here ..." The disillusioned bird returns to her cage, to her safety. Next day the queen finds her, lifeless in the cage, the door is still open.

Our dreams are no longer small-scale. Through Zoom and Teams, Facebook and Instagram, and previously through satellite TV and big names like Radiohead and the Beatles, we became globally connected. From our cages, we look through our common window – the world wide web – at the same content and images and share the same dreams. In Radiohead's words, it's all "so fucking special". Do I really want to go back to the office? Have I not got used to my home office, from which I have lectured in Canada, America, UK, China, Russia and India during the lockdown? Do I want to drive two hours in the car every day again? Do I want to lecture again to physically present students, who sometimes won't hide their disinterest in my passions? Do I want to go back to the smaller - human - scale?

Mass technology is attractive: "in uniformity we stand". Yet I know from experience that "in diversity we stand" applies to me. Although I was neurodiverse I didn't have to be crazy, I was appreciated exactly for being a little different. In practice, however, the large-scale (BigTech) systems in our world increasingly contribute to the opposite, to unity, or even uniformity. We use the same smart devices and apps all over the world, such as Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp. As a result, we look fairly uniformed at each other and at ourselves; Images, memes, and other "interesting" (often "extreme") content can go viral at lightning speed. It has given us a new status as global citizens. Our students can use their knowledge and skills everywhere: they are also global citizens. We have become globally recognizable to each other.

This has two sides. It can be positively stated that the Babylonian confusion of tongues has now really been overcome. Negatively you can say that we are colonized by (Big) technology and the world language (basic) English. It is certain that diversity in these uniform movements has come under pressure. This applies to biodiversity and cultural diversity, but also to neurodiversity. Increasingly more people can no longer keep up with the worldwide (visual) language and apps - and with the cohesive loss of physical, small-scale connection in place and language. For example, more and more people are being diagnosed with ASD, dyslexia, or AD(H)D. Constantly having to adapt to new technological possibilities also regularly translates into burn-out, bore-out, loneliness, or alienation.

The confusions of tongues may be over, but there is an increasing need for secret languages. As a science, cryptography is now more important than ever, for example to keep internet communication safe. And we, we're trapped in our wonder cage. We don't belong here, but what technology brings is "so fucking special" that we want more and more! What are we waiting for to end: the lockdown, or our existence on this planet? Will we ever fly out again?

"It can be positively stated that the Babylonian confusion of tongues has now really been overcome. Negatively you can say that we are colonized by (Big) technology and the world language (basic) English."