

## Two great but dangerous loves

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

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

**A**ll my life I have been passionate about technology and fascinated by machines and their history, such as beautiful cars, or beautiful musical instruments such as guitars, pianos, or the first analogue and digital synthesizers ... It almost feels like abuse to me when a machine is mistreated or not maintained! So the conclusion that technology is the big problem of our time, as I said last week, really hurts me. But the fact is that we live technology; technology is as ubiquitous as nature used to be. It has reduced biodiversity and cultural diversity, creating a dangerous global uniformity with pollution, deforestation, climate problems and boredom and loneliness, also on a global scale. A lot of technology has been developed in the "war industry", and it can be used just as easily for, as against, humanity.

What awaits us seems so obvious, the speed of innovation is still increasing and we are getting further and further into trouble. However, we cannot live without technology. We are naturally poorly adapted to most natural conditions on our planet, so we have used technology to survive everywhere. We have started to use more and more energy to keep it warm, or to cool down, to continue working at home or to travel around the world.

Mark Zuckerberg can invest billions in a Metaverse (although many smaller companies are already establishing a 3D internet on the now traditional internet). But nobody seems to realize that our road to the future is actually less technology, leaving much more room for nature. Forget the Metaverse, embrace the universe. Location and culture, including language, are traditionally linked, each region (and in the past even city, village or family) had its own customs, activities and (regional) language/dialect. More than 6,909 languages are still spoken worldwide (it is estimated that there were 70,000 in 1900), of which 50% to 90% are expected to have disappeared by 2100.

In the 20th century, the philosophy of technology emerged, a direction, with names like Lewis Mumford, Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Ellul and Hans Jonas. They pioneered the argument that modern technology has come to dominate the natural and social realm, that living in modern times practically means living in technology rather than in nature. Although, in fact, centuries earlier civilization had been described by, for example, Rousseau as "the fatal attraction of educated man". Rousseau wrote in 1754: "The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying 'This is mine', and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any one have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows, 'Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody.'" (1754/2012). In the early Enlightenment, many more philosophers/scientists argued with Rousseau that Reason would bring man into conflict with nature, and that progress from bad to better was an illusion. Only now is the realization that the dream of the technological utopia has finally turned out to be a dystopia of unprecedented magnitude, is becoming more and more common.

Of course one may argue that it is not the technology that is the problem, but the use of it. But no individual, body or government is in control, technology development has a life of its own in the laboratories of knowledge institutions and science, and especially in the hands of thousands of innovators and companies, who earn their living with it. To put it bluntly: it is either the technology or it is the people who parasitize the planet and form a plague with it. But then I love people even more than technology!

Rousseau, J.J. (1754/2012): *The Basic Political Writings*. Hackett Publishing Company: Indianapolis.