

Only informed opinions? I wish everyone an Annemarie!

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

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

This column is about opinions, in connection to both my news versus fake news column, and ever-diminishing diversity column. In the Dutch media I read that the government will actively combat misleading (Corona) news and disinformation. Especially well-educated people increasingly say / write that opinions should only be expressed if they are well informed. For example, social media is forced to post a warning or to remove bad or uninformed opinions that are shared or read beyond a threshold. What's wrong with this?

A lot! To begin with, the same Dutch government appears to have proclaimed until recently that mouth masks are not necessary in elderly care, that there is more than sufficient testing capacity in hospital labs in the Netherlands alone and that the spread of the virus through the air is negligible. Three examples of “disinformation”. But that's not my point. If regulations and / or media succeed in providing a platform for only “informed” opinions, there is no longer any place for dissenting opinions - diversity. Due to dominant (Western) superiority thinking, anthropological and cultural diversity has already shrunk irreparably. Just a few decades ago, this was unashamedly presented as merit: Western man, with consistent hand (weapons) and soothing words, has initiated and elevated just about every cultural expression of human societies into its “blessed” technology and rationality. Each descendant of the numerous ancient tribes has meanwhile been “educated and blessed” with the great merits of 300 years of Enlightenment.

There is no shortage of people who stand up for the “truth”. Relatively new here are the fact checkers that separate news from fake news. Associations that face an age-old skepticism towards the mainstream powers such as the Association against Quackery (1881), the Skepsis Foundation (1987) and Skepp (1990) are united in the European Council of Skeptical Organizations (1994). However, they could easily become an instrument of power due to decreasing tolerance for other than the standardized (informed) opinions. If a 25-century-old method like acupuncture is put aside that did not originate in “our” scientific tradition, but is now on the rise, it will look suspiciously like discrimination.

Philosophers are often considerably more modest with truth claims than other scientists. Philosopher Richard Rorty (1932-2007), for example, argued that a perspective is impossible with which one can rise above all other perspectives on reality in order to determine which perspective is correct or true. Thomas Samuel Kuhn (1922-1996) states that even in the natural sciences (the “hard” science) paradigms can only be compared with partialities and Rorty concludes from this that even natural science must also be seen as a social and cultural phenomenon, equivalent to art and politics.

Technology unifies for example through smartphones, apps and social media on which we present a dream version of ourselves to virtual friends. But if we happily trumpet our thoughts and it deviates from mainstream truth / reality, or even sounds like a conspiracy theory, rules and regulations force tech-companies to isolate us, or even to shut us up. That's an unpleasant development, large-scale is a monster that tramples on everything that is different and thus ultimately crushes the freedom of speech. We “bleat” like sheep, preferably in unison (we are a lot of herd animal and a bit predator), but listening is apparently less provoked by smart technology. Diversity is at risk in various areas (bio, culture, languages, opinions, etc.). It's not too late yet. Why should someone be quiet when he / she feels something, but cannot substantiate it? Why can't mankind have completely different interpretations of life? Not everyone needs a top IQ to work on the boundaries of knowing. One of the main influences in my life was Annemarie, a deeply mentally handicapped girl. I taught her music for a few years, and she taught me what life and connection were really about. Since then I have been saying it regularly, I wish everyone an Annemarie.