Time for a change?

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

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

According to the late AI philosopher Hubert Dreyfus (1929-2017), our age is characterized by technological nihilism, just as the pre-Enlightenment era was characterized by Christianity - saints and sinners - and, for example, the Greek era by heroes and slaves. He argues that technology leads to nihilism, because it encourages a fixation on trying to get the best out of every possibility, whereby we stay at the level from where we can manipulate everything and, consequently, don't get deeply involved into anything. In the resulting nihilism we become increasingly passive (more consuming than producing), already beautifully expressed by Søren Kierkegaard in *The Present Age* (1846): "A revolutionary age is an age of action; ours is the age of advertisement and publicity. Nothing ever happens but there is immediate publicity everywhere. In the present age a rebellion is, of all things, the most unthinkable". Striking in this context is how in 2017 Hubert Dreyfus announced his own death in a tweet: "Reports of my demise are not exaggerated."

Interesting is the critique of the systems world, which started (again) with Kierkegaard and via great thinkers such as Heidegger, Hannah Arendt and Habermas ends up with Hubert Dreyfus and his brother Stuart (mathematician and a master of neuronal networks), for example in their book *Mind over Machine* (1987). Technology, and more generally, the systems world, both colonizes human reality and the environment, as well as simplifies humans into consuming and manipulable entities in an economic imperative: infinite growth from finite resources. Now we read, for example, that research has shown that Instagram contributes to objectifying people and that the images on social media are internalized, so that self-esteem and self-image are more than ever (especially among young people) related, which on average leads to shame, fear, depression and eating disorders (Engeln et al., 2020). The first photos were taken in Kierkegaard's time, and so the objectification of appearance began, before that mirrors had been contributing to the self-image for several centuries. It is good to make clear here that this "system thinking" does not mean thinking from a dynamic system model.

The research by Engeln et al. also shows that even the presence of mirrors or an appearance-related commentary on social media already reduces cognitive performance due to impaired executive functioning (attention shifts to considering one's own position compared to others).

With an ever-growing pool of peer-reviewed articles under the search terms "social media-induced depression" and "social media-induced anxiety", one would expect big tech companies to take responsibility. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. In the Dutch press I read, for example, that Netflix has put a distasteful series online, in which people who have become poor because of the system, get the chance to either win and get out of debt or lose by playing a child's game. and be brutally murdered, for entertainment. Unfortunately, Netflix has set the age rating to 12 years, so that terrible re-enactments have already been observed among children in the UK and in the Netherlands. It's time for change.

We leave a heavy legacy for posterity: diminished diversity and an exploited planet. As if that weren't enough, we also burden them with the millions of photos stored in the cloud every day. There is even a new technology that promises to keep the brain completely undamaged at death for thousands of years, so that future generations could upload all thoughts into a computer reality: Mind-uploading (Nectome). As if future generations don't have enough of their own lives and problems, they can also re-activate ours. A technological heaven ahead, for those of us unhappy under the colonization of the systems world (technological nihilism). Hubert Dreyfus should be read a lot more!

Engeln, R., Loach, R., Imundo, M. N., & Zola, A. (2020). *Compared to Facebook, Instagram use causes more appearance comparison and lower body satisfaction in college women.* Body Image, 34, 38-45.