Applied psychology (Part 2): At the mercy of smart devices?

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

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

What will it be like if you were born in a social environment where your gifts to society actually don't matter? Would you feel liberated from the urge to prove your worth? Or would you feel lost, useless among all those others, some of whom are deemed necessary to contribute to society in a working way?

Questions like these are directly related to the psychology of give and take discussed last week. Historian Yuval Harari writes in his *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* that due to increasing automation and robotization, large groups of people will probably become completely redundant in the labour market in the near future. He proposes a basic income as a solution. But social media is so addictively successful because it feeds our illusion that we are giving and receiving attention to each other, making us feel like we really matter and are connected. While being virtually connected by posting and responding to others' messages is more of a pacifier than an actual source of nutrition, it contributes to the psychology of give and take.

Experiments with a basic income exempt people (temporarily) from the obligation to work or apply for a job. It is often looked at whether people are going to work on their own meaning, development, entrepreneurship or creativity. Meaning is (implicitly) a goal. But a broad basic income would certainly become completely detached from meaning in the long run, perhaps offering the unemployed the opportunity to be paying consumers of workers who are still allowed to make products and matter while they are at work. We become money-fed Hansel and Gretel, who only have to consume. A bizarre vision of the future …

The future of work

Last week I gave a lecture about the future of work. Much can be said about this, which in the end will turn out to be little more than speculation (it's hard to predict, especially the future). A futurologist speaks before my lecture. Excitedly they walk into the hall after the break, with comments like " What an exciting future lies ahead, where almost all our work will be done better by AI and machines, we live in a special time". I asked people what they think about losing their job and how they can contribute to society? No answer, and then carefully that they hadn't thought about that yet. The discussion about the future of work, including the use of "smart" technology, is never conducted democratically. What does it mean, for example, to have to think or work more, psychologically for us, for our mental well-being? It is never on the agenda of futurologists, or tech companies, who make millions from disruptive technology development and implementation.

During my lecture I argue that a basic income can be a good tool to fight poverty, because several studies show that poverty is both harmful and unjust. Not being allowed to contribute to our world while working should not become a default, in terms of give and take that is poor. My lecture is mainly about the psychological consequences of future technology. Much can be said, which seems largely unspoken, about the consequences of social media addiction on our lifestyle and urbanization and globalization on our (cultural) diversity.

Technology is indispensable, humanity as a literally naked monkey would only have a very limited biotope without technology. However, technology has unintentionally started to dictate what we focus on (social platforms, global media) and how we live. In this way technology turns into technocracy. Technocracy undermines democracy. The vague indeterminacy in which robotics and artificial intelligence will transcend our minds and understanding appeals to another psychological foundation: religious surrender. The king is dead, long live the king: The wrathful speaking god became a number god.

Someone remarks after my lecture that it is crazy that we all "accept" this; no one seems interested in what we want to give while working. We agree, we're at the mercy of smart devices!