

Jimmy Extreme

Sometimes my parents called me Jimmy Extreme, pointing out that I think quite digitally (black and white). I defended myself by stating that dialectics is a proven effective method of finding the truth. However, there's more than just black and white. Although Corona is a very nasty virus, we can learn from the global imbalance it causes.

Much has been written about switching to a better (sustainable) balance after the crisis. What strikes me most during this crisis, however, is that dissent is almost directly related to conspiracy thinking. The "official" opinions are raised above any reasonable and unreasonable doubt, which is dangerous, because unexpected events, such as the new Coronavirus, always lack knowledge at first. By accepting assumptions as 'facts' too quickly, much-needed reflection - the ideation phase - is put aside. In the Netherlands, for example, Maurice de Hond was quickly dismissed as 'crazy' by the official authorities and media, after he stated in March / April that climate plays a role in the spread of the virus, which he says mainly spreads airborne. At the beginning of April he substantiated this - of course insufficiently, because there was also too little data for him - by plotting the then known global outbreaks on a climate map. With increasing interest in his views among his blog audience, disgust for this "alternative" model grew among official (media) authorities. Several times his publications are removed or dismissed as disinformation. Now, seven months later, however, there is no one who still believes in the WHO "truths" from the very beginning. The "fake news" of De Hond from March / April has almost completely become the official scientific truth.

I certainly don't want to blame anyone, everyone has acted to the best of their knowledge and consciousness. Moreover, De Hond might as well have been wrong (and he presented himself as a "Jimmy Extreme", very recognizable to me). However, the mechanism of truth-finding and polarization is interesting. What about that?

Digital analysis sometimes falsely creates a sense of predictability and security. Artificial Intelligence can very well be deployed in a large-scale world in which actually little surprising events occur. In such a world, patterns hidden from human observation can be discovered by clever pattern recognizers, as a result of which, for example, Google "sees" a virus infection (cold) earlier than epidemiologists on the basis of search engine analysis, or based on travel patterns the British Rail "knows" how many travellers there will be at every hour of the day and can therefore deploy enough trains. In the world of large amounts of data, you can rely on 'history' and therefore on AI.

Our world is becoming increasingly large-scale, and that partly determines the great success of AI. But the unpredictable, the accidental twists, or as maths professor Nassim Taleb calls it, the Black Swans, are almost completely beyond the predictable, sometimes beyond the imaginable. And it is precisely those small events with enormous consequences - Corona, George Floyd - that determine our lives. In the words of George Michael "turn a different corner and we would never have to have met". If your parents had been interrupted just before that one intercourse, you would not exist.

Taleb classifies events with respect to predictability into four quadrants, from quadrant 1, Mediocristan, where life is simple, forecasting is safe because models work, to quadrant 4, or Extremistan (unpredictable, domain controlled by black swans). The successes of data science (AI, machine learning, etc.) concern the first quadrant, but do not apply to the fourth quadrant, where, according to Taleb, they wrongly give a sense of security and predictability. However, our inclination is to explain the events in Extremistan afterwards. In Extremistan, models do not apply, neither scientific nor conspiracy models. But where do you think we need knowledge most, Mediocristan or Extremistan? Indeed, in the domain of the Jimmy E's.

Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

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

24 November 2020