BY GERARD DE JONG

Oskar Gstrein is a university lecturer in International and European law. He teaches the impact of digitalization on human rights. A subject as grateful as it is complex, in these times of corona. Gstrein is concerned about the curtailment of our freedoms and privacy, but also sees rays of hope. “Our fundamental rights are more important than ever before.”

The Austrian scholar studied law and philosophy in his native country. During his work as a researcher for the special rapporteur for privacy at the United Nations, he ended up in Groningen. Now he teaches students here and does research at Campus Fryslân’s Data Research Centre. “We explore how to reduce the impact of petty crime,” says Gstrein. “Crime figures have been going down for years, but people are feeling increasingly unsafe. Why is that happening, and what can we do about it?”

The corona app is complex
The Austrian’s professional field has been in the eye of the storm in recent months. Shortly after the outbreak of the coronavirus, the Netherlands also started designing several apps to stop the pandemic. Gstrein follows the developments with some suspicion. “The app that the government organized was a disaster. But maybe that is a good thing, at the end of the day. It shows how difficult it is to create an app that both works and protects the user from abuse by the government or criminals.”

The app is, at the same time, a new surveillance system, Gstrein argues. “The app doesn’t identify if someone has corona. The use of these technological resources is potentially very dangerous. In addition, it leads to social pressure. Do we want to know whether our neighbours or colleagues have corona? And how do we respond to people who don’t want to install the app? Refusal causes suspicion.”

Code is law
On the other hand, there is too much attention for the technical side of such an app, and not enough for its legal and ethical side. “That is what we call ‘Code is law’. First, the product is built, and then research will have to determine whether it is in line with our legislation and rights. You see that happen time and time again. Our fundamental rights seem to be an abstract fact, but we have centuries of experience. The trick is how to properly implement such an app. After 9/11, we were faced with the data retention of our telecom data. We have been struggling with this for two decades now, we know how this data has been abused, among others by Edward Snowden. You would have thought we had learned our lessons from that. It is frustrating that this repeats itself and again we must continue to insist on the importance of our human rights.”

Young people need space
“We are not used to a crisis like this. Our grandparents, both farmers in Tyrol, had to deal with world wars. My parents are baby boomers. My brother and I are the first generation with the luxury to do what we wanted. We were raised to conquer the world. That is different for the current generation of students. They are much more aware of big data issues, but they are also constantly feeling more pressure. Today’s adolescents also need space to discover things and grow as a person. They do that, knowing that companies are watching, while no young person can go without social media. That causes pressure. The data trail they leave is much bigger than ours. And they don’t know if and how it will come back to bite them later.”

According to Gstrein, “It is a prejudice that young people do not care about privacy.” He also notices this in his students. “The beauty of our fundamental rights is that they are more important than ever in a crisis like this. We can do two things: either we throw them out, or we apply them to this particular situation. And we must continue to ask questions: what do privacy and freedom of expression mean in the digital age?”

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Rowan-Niels links organizations and students

Students and organizations reinforce each other

Column

BY GERARD DE JONG

Rowan-Niels Spinder is a link for the future

As the head of Rowan-Niels, a sustainable growth and innovation consultancy firm, I have always been aware of the importance of connecting students and organizations. Our mission is to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and we do this by providing students with real-world challenges and opportunities to apply their knowledge.

We believe that students are the future of organizations, and it is our responsibility to help shape their future. We do this by offering internships, apprenticeships, and other opportunities that allow students to gain practical experience and develop their skills.

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Rowan-Niels Spinder

“Contemporary technology is always the right technology for its time.”

Rowan-Niels Spinder

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Where do our SE alumni end up? For this edition of Connect we talk to Leander van der Wal, who graduated last year and has worked for the Ministry of Defence since November. His goal? To contribute to society by increasing sustainability within the Department, and, by doing so, gaining enough inspiration and experience to start his own sustainable enterprise. After all, an entrepreneurial mindset is not easy to lose.

BY FABRIZIO BAMBAGIONI

Within the Department of Marine Materials and Operations (DMO), Leander van der Wal, a recent graduate from the University of Groningen, is working on the Circular Economy project. Leander graduated with a degree in Business Administration and has worked for the Ministry of Defence since November. His goal? To contribute to society by increasing sustainability within the Department, and, by doing so, gaining enough inspiration and experience to start his own sustainable enterprise.

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Favourite spots in Leeuwarden

The number of students that are enrolled in a bachelor degree or master degree programme in Leeuwarden is about 23,000. Find out what they like about Leeuwarden and what their favourite places are!

MSc Sustainable Entrepreneurship - Etienne Carchera

"Noorderplantage is one of my favourite places to go when the weather is good or, well, any time that I can really. It’s a city-park (stadspark) in the North of Leeuwarden located right behind Tresoar, the library in Leeuwarden where students from Campus Fryslân and NHL Sterden often go to study. It’s the perfect place to go chill with friends on my days off, sitting in the sun and catching some of that good vitamin D. The park is right at a bend in the canal, where I love to sit watching the ducks in the water. With COVID-19, things are a bit different now, but hopefully, I can go back to chilling in the park with my friends relatively soon!"

BSc Global Responsibility & Leadership - Kari Kuggeleijn

"There’s a cute little coffee corner in a bookshop called Boekhandel Van der Velde in the city centre, and it is my favourite place to go to! But I also like to keep it a bit secret. They only have spots for a handful of people and the quiet is one of the best things about it. It feels like a garden. There is a big tree, and you can hear the leaves rustle in the wind. There are also two very sweet, cuddly cats. They have benches and lounge chairs in bright yellow. They only serve coffee and tea, but the good kind, from local shops, and sometimes they have apple pie. It is really meant as an addition to the bookshop. They have second-hand books, cookbooks, travel books, books in other languages and every other kind of book, you can think of!"

In recent months we have been faced with a certain reality check. We have been shown that the everyday life we have always taken for granted can, in fact, be completely transformed in a split-second - the everyday life we believe is normal and we believe it takes months, even years to change. Then, suddenly, we were faced with a crisis and changes occurred in a blink of an eye. The speed with which this crisis came upon us made its severity clear to us from the beginning. On the contrary, longer time can make challenges look so much smaller and less important, and currently, there are other crises one can argue deserve the same recognition and urgent action as this one. For instance, our planet is rapidly warming in front of our eyes, but the pace is slow enough for people to take it less seriously. Even though it is actually happening terrifyingly fast in terms of our Earth’s timescale, on a human scale, our world does not seem to be transforming overnight. That is why it does not seem as important on a day to day basis.

One of the greatest lessons we have learned from this situation is the importance of the ability to adapt. We have all adapted by doing everything within our power to minimize the damage caused by the current pandemic. We stayed at home, and we have limited all human contact. However, adaptation is not only important when sudden situations come up, like this one, where we must act quickly, but also in cases where predictable changes come our way and adaptation is still within our power. Such adaptation might require us to conduct minor lifestyle changes, in order to allow others the same privileged opportunities we have had throughout our lives. Crises are challenges that ask us to be adaptable for the greater good. In solidarity with others. I believe that it is undesirable, or even dangerous to become stuck in self-made quicksand of habits and ways of living.

“Crises are challenges that ask us to be adaptable for the greater good. In solidarity with others.”

Another important lesson we have learned from this situation is to prioritize what is important and what we care for. At the end of the day, slow crises are also threatening lives and threatening safety. They are even threatening our future. Now, we have proved to ourselves that change is possible, and we have outstanding adaptation skills. I encourage us all to continue using those skills of ours, in solidarity with the other residents of this planet.