

looking back on 2020

we believe too much and know too little

What happened to us? The attempt of an analysis ... Which naturally not only refers to this year but goes further back and has several levels.

To the extent we have tried in the past centuries to free ourselves from social and religious dogmas or to raise them to a more "factual", "scientific" level, new mental models were established which, in my opinion, we question too little, although they have a massive impact on our view of the world - often without us noticing. At a point where we adapt mental models without questioning them, we are believing. Not that belief is wrong, it is an important part of our spiritual life. What bothers me is the mixture of belief and knowledge, when we consider belief to be knowledge and vice versa.

Money/prosperity/wealth

when it comes to money and material prosperity, we have developed an ideology which I would call "Post Calvinist"¹. Nowadays, economic and material success have become important factors for social acceptance - which was certainly correct because it was associated with hard work and commitment. If this connection no longer applies or the conclusion is made "he has material prosperity because he is hardworking", then we are no longer with reality, but believing something. In times of neoliberalism, financial speculation, etc., this belief can lead to fatal misjudgments, especially when it comes to the moral of those (people or organizations) who own a lot.

Power and influence

Furthermore, from my point of view, the connection between money and power, in form of influence, is far too little questioned. Philip II of Macedon² already said: "There is no wall so high that a donkey laden with gold cannot climb it." I would say it is undisputed that the more financially powerful someone is (as a person or organization) the more she/he can gain influence and the more power she/he has. Something that can be seen from bottom to top in all areas of our life. And it surprisingly has become more and more socially accepted, because in my opinion it is related to the mental model of the previous paragraph. It should be mentioned that power and influence have two properties:

1. Power corrupts³, what history has shown us often
2. Influence and power generally want to remain undetected in order not to encounter resistance from those who are influenced or oppressed.

¹ I mean the aspect that in Calvinism "individual and economic success" is related to the grace of God.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_II_of_Macedon

³ (German) <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000006331597/macht-korrumpiert-auch-die-ehrlichen>

Do we know who is influencing in what form and on what levels of our globalized society? Do we know about the moral and ethical principles of those who are influencing? Or do we just believe that it going to be all right?

Science

What originally were complete opposites - "Believe and Science" - in my eyes, in the course of history it has become more and more of "Believe in Science", where we have come to something completely unscientific, because it is not scientific to believe. "Scientific research involves using the scientific method, which seeks to objectively explain the events of nature in a reproducible way."⁴ We should also ask ourselves three questions

1. who finances research and science?
2. do those who finance gain influence?
3. can researchers and scientists be influenced?

And again, I see a mental model "because it is scientific, it is true", which is more of a belief than scientifically proven. And if we then only hear one scientific opinion about something discussed controversially in science - it is in a way like the heliocentric system of Copernicus (1543)⁵, where the scientific discourse did not lead to the official opinion (till 1757⁶), but rather the believe model desired by those in power (in this case the church).

Politics

We say we live in a democracy⁷ where power comes from the citizens. To be precise, we live in a "indirect/representative democracy"⁸ in which representatives represent the interests of the citizens. Is this still the case? Or do the elected representatives only partially or not at all represent the interests of the citizens? Does the state have more control over the citizens than the citizens have over the state? Has something gone wrong here? From my observation of the past 30 years there has been a slow but continuous shift from a policy that "listens to the interests of the citizens" to a policy where "the citizen should follow the guidelines of the government". But then we do no longer live in a democracy, we are just believing to live in a democracy.

Journalism and press

The fourth power⁹ in our democracy has the duty to create an informed, responsible society capable to make decisions. This picture sits deep within us, but does it correspond to our nowadays reality? If it does not correspond to reality, then we are in a certain way at the "belief in journalism, the press". Has anything changed over the last few decades? From my point of view, yes, because we use to have a broad

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science#Scientific_method

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicolaus_Copernicus

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heliocentrism#Age_of_Reason

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy>

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Representative_democracy

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_Estate

spectrum from "right to left / conservative to progressive" and well-known representatives kept a close eye on what governments and those in power did, the spectrum became continuously narrower and investigative became more and more loyal to the government.¹⁰ There are indications that various interest groups (government/politics, business, etc.) are influencing what is said, printed shown on TV. In my opinion, investigative critical journalism has become a phenomenon of alternative fringe groups who are labeled by the mainstream as "dangerous fantasies" and "conspiracy theorists". But what does that mean? In my eyes, we should believe what the mainstream is telling us and should not question it critically. At this point we are not informed citizens any more but we have to believe in journalism.

Public and private debate

It has got smaller and smaller, even smaller this year, but it is a process of the past few years. Today at the end of 2020 we are already talking about a divided society. Why did that happen? From my point of view and considering what has been said before, it is quite logical. If we try, we can discuss facts controversially and come to a consensus or not, but usually we gain new knowledge. It is much more difficult to discuss questions of believe without emotion and without being personally attacked and therefore debate rooms have become increasingly small. Taboos, resentment, insults, etc. have been the result of this. The "division of society" that we are experiencing now is not a division based on facts, but on questions of believe.

If we are, in our present situation, afraid of a "deadly" virus, not based on a broad, scientifically founded and discussed basis, then it is not different from the church saying there is no heliocentric system, but only the geocentric one - yes there is of course a difference - the government refers to "science" and the church refers to "the Bible".

And here we have another important factor, **fear**. Research has shown that fear incapacitates large areas of our logical, rational thinking. Fear is therefore an awfully bad partner in critical situations which require logical thinking and weighing up various facts. Various fears arose or were stirred from different directions in the past year they have not contributed to a better communication, on the opposite, they have hardened fronts in many cases. On this topic an interesting lecture was given by Dr. Daniele Ganser in Vienna on "Corona and Fear"¹¹.

My summary

I think it is important that we ask ourselves to what extent we have adopted mental models and beliefs and have begun to judge the reality according to them – do we function the way the system wants us to (systemically relevant). And to what extent is our ability to judge limited by fears. Of course, humans tend to become systemically relevant and to have fears. We should take a good look inside ourselves to find out to which extent we are driven by fear our mental models, because only by

¹⁰ German - <https://www.cicero.de/kultur/investigativer-journalismus-von-der-inflation-eines-begriffs>

¹¹ <https://youtu.be/zoagh8deyRo> (English subtitles available)

doing that we will be able to free ourselves and gain control over our thoughts and feelings.

With this background to me for the coming year is important

- that I recognize my fears and work on them - fear is just a feeling that arises within us, it is not real
- that I observe myself critically to what extent I believe and to what extent know something
- to be even more tolerant with all those who have a different opinion, a different belief - because that way I can contribute to a more tolerant society
- to I check the facts of what is presented to me to not believe something by mistake

Other perspectives - wisdom of the crowd

Galton¹² was a keen observer. In 1906, visiting a livestock fair, he stumbled upon an intriguing contest. An ox was on display, and the villagers were invited to guess the animal's weight after it was slaughtered and dressed. Nearly 800 participated, and Galton was able to study their individual entries after the event. Galton stated that "the middlemost estimate expresses the vox populi, every other estimate being condemned as too low or too high by a majority of the voters", and reported this value (the median, in terminology he himself had introduced, but chose not to use on this occasion) as 1,207 pounds. To his surprise, this was within 0.8% of the weight measured by the judges. Soon afterwards, in response to an enquiry, he reported the mean of the guesses as 1,197 pounds, but did not comment on its improved accuracy. Recent archival research has found some slips in transmitting Galton's calculations to the original article in Nature: the median was actually 1,208 pounds, and the dressed weight of the ox 1,197 pounds, so the mean estimate had zero error. James Surowiecki uses this weight-judging competition as his opening example: had he known the true result, his conclusion on the wisdom of the crowd¹³ would no doubt have been more strongly expressed.¹⁴

The SWR repeated this experiment with a dog and came to the same conclusion.¹⁵

Obviously if we are no longer at facts, but with opinions, it seems to be good to have as many different ones as possible, because obviously result can be something positive.

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Galton

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wisdom_of_Crowds

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Galton#Variance_and_standard_deviation

¹⁵ <https://youtu.be/F7QIo1i-un0>

perspective

Focus not just on what we no longer want, what is going wrong, but also look ahead at what we want.

In which world/society do I want to live in the future? In which world/society do I want my children/grandchildren to live?

Have fantasies/ideas, in the past they have caused developments and innovations in the world/society. It always where people - some or many - and not those in charge who made the world change.

I wish you all the best for 2021

Yours Jojo

Online <https://harslem.com/looking-back-on-2020-we-believe-too-much-and-know-too-little>