Knowledge as a Global Challenge in times of information overload

Toespraak van Frans Timmersmans, minister van Buitenlandse zaken, bij gelegenheid van de opening van het Anna van Buerengebouw van het Leiden University College The Hague, op 31 oktober 2013.

1. ‘Knowledge is power’, the classical interpretation

Some twenty-seven years ago I received my university degree. The graduation ceremony took place at the University of Nijmegen, and the crowd was not unlike today’s. A room full of young people with great hopes for the future—the main difference was the décor and furnishings. Congratulations on this splendid new building!

Sitting in the front row that day was my grandfather, Cor Heijnis. He was 76 at the time, but you could have easily mistaken him for a man of 90, or even older. He was sitting there in a suit with his walking stick, weathered by 40 years of hard graft in the mines of Limburg, breathing heavily, his lungs destroyed by coal dust. But he was grinning from ear to ear, proud as a peacock of his eldest grandson.

For him, this was a crowning moment, the triumph of his own ideals. His own father had taken him out of school at 14 and sent him off to work: the family’s poverty gave him no other choice.

But he clung to his ideals, fighting a lifelong battle against the absurd notion that if you’re born poor you’ll remain poor. Every blast he ignited in the mine smoothed the path I would later walk down. He always encouraged me to stay inquisitive and savour the knowledge he’d been denied.

To my grandfather, gathering knowledge and ultimately going to university were inextricably linked with the social-democratic ideal he fostered. The ideal that you can rise above poverty. He hoped that one day the working class would be able to educate their own Bachelors of Science. Knowledge as power.

I strongly believe that this traditional social-democratic ideal has been achieved. But at the same time, we must concede that a very fundamental paradigm shift is taking place in our world. One which, frankly, I believe we haven’t quite wrapped our heads around.

2. Knowledge today: information overload

The message used to be clear: knowledge is power – increase your knowledge, increase your power. But is this still true today, in our information society? Doesn’t the opposite often ring true? The more knowledge we acquire, the more agitated and powerless we feel?

That’s something we experience in our personal lives.

All day, every day, we read about other people’s successes on Facebook or Twitter. We’re blasted with information about everything under the sun – the gruesome scenes in Syria, the joyful images from Tahrir Square, your former neighbour’s baby, the government shutdown in the US, your high
school sweetheart’s new job, and then – wham – back to the floods in Manila, the epic storm of last week or the passing away of Lou Reed.

We witness the news as it happens, and are left asking ourselves helplessly ‘Why? Who? How?’

And at the same time we feel left out or alone: ‘Where does all this leave me? Do I still matter? Is there any way left for me to influence what happens in the world, or should I just give up, overwhelmed and powerless?’

My generation learnt to search for information and knowledge. With that went organising, analysing and drawing conclusions. But my youngest children’s generation may never have to actively search for knowledge. Searching today is something you do with your fingertips, on your smartphone. And in the blink of an eye, you’ve found what you need.

But your smartphone will not organise, analyse and classify for you. Above all, the information your smartphone finds is abundant. It comes from Wikipedia, from friends on social networks, from shady websites with exotic theories, from websites that tell you the pain in your abdomen is probably as lethal as it is rare, from all kinds of news sources – some more reliable than others – from people with their own political agenda and from harmless hobbyists.

Today, information is no longer a scarce commodity. In fact, there’s more information out there than we can cope with on a daily basis.

Estimates as to how much information there is on the internet vary, but everyone agrees that it’s somewhere between unfathomable and impossible to grasp—YouTube reportedly has videos that no one – apart from the uploader – has ever seen, and the collection of these videos also grows uninhibited.

It’s not just the amount of information that’s growing, but also the number of sources: in a world of networks, central information hubs fed by universities, government ministries or the offices of the newspaper business are becoming less dominant. Valuable knowledge may appear from anywhere these days.

We’re drowning in a sea of information. So how are we supposed to process it all? The enormity of that challenge can fill us with fear. Fear of losing track, fear of losing control, of being unable to fit it all into a comprehensive story that we live by. Shortly before his death, social-democrat historian Tony Judt wrote in Ill Fares the Land:

‘We have entered an age of fear [...]. Fear of the uncontrollable speed of change, fear of the loss of employment, fear of losing ground to others in an increasingly unequal distribution of resources, fear of losing control of the circumstances and routines of our daily life.’

But perhaps most important, according to Judt, is the:

‘fear that it is not just we who can no longer shape our lives but that those in authority have also lost control, to forces beyond their reach.’

It sounds all too familiar. We can’t easily allay all our fears, but as Judt rightly points out, a sense of being in control would at least be something.
It’s all about control – about how we actually cope with this information overload. That’s an issue I’ve been pondering not only personally but also in my role as minister. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs plays a role in promoting knowledge, paying for endowed professors to lecture one day a week at the universities of Utrecht, Groningen and Maastricht.

That’s quite a traditional way of processing knowledge, one that my grandfather would recognise. But the Ministry is involved in new forms of knowledge too. We explore the opportunities Big Data holds in store.

One example is a project being carried out with The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies. Through data mining, we’re looking at whether it’s possible to analyse emerging countries’ word use in order to better predict their priorities. In other words, if we do some serious data crunching to identify key words that come up again and again in a country’s policy, will it throw up useful knowledge?

Let me give you another example: the UN is studying how big data can be used for humanitarian aid in the wake of major disasters. By studying patterns in communication between people, we can learn a lot about how they are responding and how we can help.

New techniques to analyse Big Data have my attention because it represents a fresh attempt to harvest useful knowledge from copious and seemingly unmanageable amounts of information: using the abundance of data for new ways of understanding, analysing and classifying. Of course, we have to be aware of the flipside. Data can be biased, and if you don’t ask the right questions, it’s easy to draw the wrong conclusions. Data is a peculiar resource, and our greatest challenge is to understand, fathom and organise it. That’s no easy task.

3. ‘Knowledge is power’, reassessed

You invited me here this afternoon to talk about ‘Global Challenges’. Now, you may think I’ve taken too much liberty in interpreting this request. But I believe that in a world where information is lapping at our door, being able to make sense of it is by far the biggest challenge. That will make us more confident and less afraid of the information we are bombarded with all day long. If we can organise that information, it will be easier to understand.

A society that has learnt how to organise information will be in a better position to share information and reach new heights. In other words: in today’s world, achieving an even spread of knowledge, power and income on a global scale is no longer a matter of acquiring information but of organising, analysing and classifying it.

That’s a challenge for us all, no matter what your political persuasion. But as a social democrat, and as the grandson of Cor Heijnis, a miner from Heerlen, it’s a challenge I’m eager to take on. Expanding our knowledge is no longer enough. It’s all about creating order out of chaos. If we can do that, we can keep working on what, for me, is the key goal: using knowledge to keep my grandfather’s dream alive in the 21st century.

If you ask me, ladies and gentlemen, that is the greatest ‘global challenge’ of our time.
As far as your contribution to this challenge goes: all the facilities are in place, so if we don’t succeed it won’t be down to this new building. What will make all the difference, then, is what you yourself do with the means and opportunities at your disposal. I’m confident that you will put this great facility to good use. In doing so, I wish you every success.