



## **South Africa at the dawn of 2020 Report of a Listening Post held in Pretoria on, 18 January 2020**

**Conveners:** Louise Tonelli and Frans Cilliers

### **PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES**

Three main preoccupations; Nature and Technology, Hope and Negativity and, Currency of greed.

#### 1. Nature and Technology

Participants were preoccupied with the cloud and the transition between the old and the new. The conflict was between the cloud in which we store our data and nature's cloud. There was concern about our addiction to the data companies such as Amazon, Alibaba, Microsoft and, how we engage with these in the cloud. Questions were raised about how we could get out of this addiction, for example by smoking weed (which came up throughout the session). Participants were preoccupied with how the media was playing a negative role in how it made society think - "What we are interested in and engage in on social media is what is given back to us dependent on the algorithms that tell us what we are interested in".

Participants fear becoming robotic which manifests in seeing more of the same – not seeing different things on social media, only a repetition of the same. To disconnect from social media is experienced as a relief and relaxing. Yet, social media was not seen as all bad as it is often used to pass the time. However, there was a wish for using fresh eyes vs new eyes.

There were preoccupations about not testing assumptions. It was stated that people assume a lot and do not test their assumptions. The need for testing assumptions was stressed several times, in an effort to confront own bias. Participants felt as if they are programmed and automated with concerns about what were they being fed with. "Who is the human extension of the robot?".

The participants were concerned about how nature talks to us through terrible disasters such as the fires in Australia. Gretha Thunberg was seen to be like Hector Peterson (an iconic young Sowetan man carrying a dead friend shot by Apartheid police in the 1970s). Participants spoke about how they were trying to make sense of the wilderness. There were preoccupations of being stuck and questions about whether the illusion was too break, use or abuse the stuck-ness.

#### 2. Hope and Negativity

The participants shared experiences of being hopeful in 2020 and wondered "what is my hope". There were preoccupations about something to come in a neo-colonialist

society while being influenced by both the media and social media. While preoccupied with hope there was a statement that the younger generation (Millennials) were doing amazing things. The recent winnings of South Africans on the world stage such as the rugby team winning the world cup, a choir from Limpopo almost winning America's Got Talent show and Tunzi being crowned as Ms Universe were discussed as positives and something to be hopeful about.

In the midst of the hope participants were preoccupied with an overwhelming experience of negativity in the country. Questions were pondered about how to break the negativity. A new movement started on face book named "We are staying" (and not immigrating) was discussed as an alternative to the negativity in the country. The participants felt that negativity was being countered in small pockets in the country and perhaps not the whole country. Participants said there was a need to work harder to find the positive. A preoccupation developed about the "business that we are busy with", yet being forced to slow down, but becoming stuck in the big things, not solving the Macro world's issues. The potholes in the roads found in different parts of the country became a preoccupation and the differences between the urban and semi-rural areas where sewerage ran down some of the roads in the town. Questions arose on how to bring hope, address the damage in the country and sewerage in the streets. Getting hands dirty was proposed. Preoccupations arose about the tower of Babel, the Israelites being stuck in the desert for 40 years.

### 3. Currency of Greed

"When is enough, enough?". Participants were preoccupied with feeling impotent and not getting enough. Participants seemed concerned about how the dynamics have shifted over the last years which causes confusion. A preoccupation evolved about the currency of greed. It was stated that the Apartheid system was a system of hoarding and now there seemed to be a different system of hoarding. Corporate greed was referred to and who shares in the currency of greed. It was said that the dynamics of Apartheid sit in the DNA of citizens of the country.

## **PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES**

### **Theme 1: Becoming a robot**

The first theme the participants identified, was that of the robot. It was said that the virtual world had an influence on our collective identity where the uniformity in becoming robots leads to us giving up our identity and losing it. The perception of being controlled by the cloud was experienced as feeding into society's negativity and our entrapment in the algorithms. This feeds group think where the received content is more similar than different and cannot be changed. Participants said that hope was being exported to machine learning which creates unrealistic expectations, while losing agency to the cloud.

Robots are made in the image of the self and man. The robot replaces God. The machine represents the saviour, entering the cloud - but as a feared object. The robot is our narcissistic view when playing god. Creation is corrupted, robots are killing man. We have created that which kills us. There is a self-loathing for what we have done and a sense of hopelessness when looking in the mirror. There is a sense of the organism attacking itself.

The robotic human is lonely in the ideal world of similarity. Innovation is needed to break out, dissociate and escape. However, this is dangerous. Robots must not go rogue. As robotic members of society we are controlled by robots. Being a robot

means the world is keeping us numb, we are kept in the dark, as if we are not conscious, but rather unconscious and lobotomised.

## **Theme 2: Stuck in a journey**

The participants were preoccupied with an overwhelming experience of negativity in the country. Questions were pondered about how to break the negativity. The movement started on face book about "we are staying" and not immigrating, was discussed as an alternate to the negativity in the country. A need was expressed to work harder to find the positive and a wish for a shortcut.

Participants were, feeling impotent not getting enough and, yet there were questions about when was enough, enough. Amid this impotence there was a sense of being forced to slow down – to break the sense of being stuck in the big things, not having to solving the Macro world and stop being trapped in the inability to escape. An escape would require a war to break the stuck-ness. Disconnection is feared because of the violence and the dangerous weapons we have at our disposal.

The feared impotence was not only felt out there (in the macro world) but also in the micro world close to home where war rages in families. Participants said that 'something must give'. Opportunities for connection need to be sought to break out of the stuck-ness. This requires a middle ground to facilitate true connection.

## **PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION**

### **Theme 1: Becoming a robot**

#### **Analysis 1:**

Emotional states of dependency and helplessness on the Macro world abound. A Macro world which controls and at the same time is uncontrollable. Yet it is not only the Macro world that is felt to be threatening - the Micro world too is raging. Hope does not reside in the present or, in the country itself, but seems to be out there connected to, and disconnected from, by means of technology, illuminated on the world stage, carried by the millennials.

The comment on the robot, is a comment on the multitude of connections, disconnecting society. Evoking a state of mind of powerlessness, hopelessness resulting in the loss of agency threatening survival of the natural self.

Survival requires evolution. Evolution has been exported to technology and the rise of the robot, where algorithms ensure similarity and easy connections, those which can be trusted. Exporting the heart to algorithms replaces the need to work with difficult connections. Yet this attack on humanity, by humanity leaves the natural self alone in its similarity. A corrupt creation resulting in, self-loathing of the alternate consciousness of a numb, unconscious lobotomised being, void of heart yet also under constant threat that the robot will go rogue and gain consciousness.

#### **Hypothesis 1:**

Man creating a robot and storing information in the cloud parallels with God living in heaven and creating humans. The preoccupation with the robot can be seen as a man's intellectual competition with God to create a different and better world. The intellectual acts as a decoy not to focus on the affective aspects of shame about how

citizens are disconnected from one another. The destruction in nature is discussed but with reference to what happens in faraway countries as if it does not affect us.

A phantasy of being controlled by outside forces, such as the cloud and tech companies, turned into robots, creates the illusion of no true agency or emotion, fortifying a dependency and justification of remaining in the dark, not to do the work of making meaningful human connections. The phantasy becomes the defence mechanism in the justification of helplessness and disconnection. Yet our shrewd ability to deauthorise creation and, create the robot to take over our own evolution, creating a new world order leaves us disgusted at our own impoverishment.

## **Theme 2: Stuck in a journey**

### **Analysis 2:**

Although escapism is present as it was in last year's Listening Post, the underlying stuck-ness seems to be experienced as less severe. At the Dawn of 1994 in South Africa with its newly won democracy, there was a promise of a rainbow nation, new promised identities and togetherness. Twenty-six years on at the Dawn of 2020 the sense of stuck-ness is still present, with the elusive hope of a rainbow nation and connectedness, as citizens fight the DNA of Apartheid in their systems.

The stuck-ness is difficult to bear. Questions abound "When is enough, enough"? and experiences of business creates the illusion of escaping the stuck-ness. However, obstacles placed along the journey, once not seen, now invades the senses with an aroma which can no longer be ignored.

While there is a wish for an exodus out of the present world order to a new world order, there seems to be an addiction to the stuck-ness, of the old ways and the inability to let go. While there is a view that we need to work harder to get out of the stuck-ness there is also an expectation about a new neo-colonialist society. However, a fear also exists of what this new order might be and what could be hoped for from it.

### **Hypothesis 2:**

Exporting hope to machine learning creates an expectation and society loses its agency to the cloud as it is too painful to think for the self, show the self and too dangerous to stand out. The repetitive patterns in society then feeds stuck-ness in sophisticated narcissism and idolisation of a robot, with no agency, in fear of the hope of what a neo-colonialist society might bring.

**[Pretoria, 10 February, Louise Tonelli and Frans Cilliers]**