AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Finland and the World at the Dawn of 2015
Report of a New Year's Listening Post

Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES.

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

The Listening Post process started with a few minutes of silence, until the participants began to express their shock over what had happened in France one week ago on the 7th of January, when three disguised and heavily armed Islamic extremists attacked the editorial office of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and killed 12 workers in retaliation for its published satirical cartoon of their prophet Muhammad. The attack resulted in a massive manhunt for the "terrorists". Yesterday, on the 11th of January, the participants of the seminar were able to watch the worldwide TV coverage of the massive protest rally comprised of hundreds of thousands of people marching for free speech and non-violence. In addition to ordinary citizens, a number of head-of-states from all over the world participated in the march.

The sharing of the personal experiences created by these events was intertwined with the
participants' feelings of insecurity and anxiety about their own safety. In addition, many of the expressed experiences were related to the strong forward thrust of the digital culture, the increasing difficulty of using the equipment, and the vulnerability to internet assault.

One of the participants entered the discussion of experiences only at the end by saying: "I have difficulty entering into this discussion because my own attitude is so positive". The participants' expressions of their opinions had such a grim overtone. Nevertheless, the dreams that were also shared among the group were full of immense energy and trust in one's own ability to survive.

Of the participants, one of the consultants was male, and the rest were middle-aged or older females.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. **Analyses and Hypotheses**

Theme 1. Threats to the life of the world's citizens

Analysis

"I felt enormous shock at the blind violence; someone just walked in and shot people." "Then after a couple of days, while ironing at home, I saw on the TV how 700 000 people gathered on the streets of Paris to march for non-violence, and I felt unbelievable joy."

"I am in a dream in a bone-dry field that could begin to burn at any time; on the other side of the border, the flames are already blazing. Everywhere I look everyone is wanting to escape; I considered it myself. Then I saw the river, named Jänisjoki [Rabbit River], and realized that there was water with which to extinguish the flames if it came any closer. I gave up the idea of leaving; I did not run like a rabbit."

"As a mother, I can only hope that nothing bad happens. My daughter is moving to St. Petersburg, and the child of a close family is re-locating to Gaza. I am afraid and cannot sleep at night when I do not know what the circumstances are for children in these places. Relief comes from the fact that, through the Internet, the children have found people who have lived in these places. These people have provided practical information about renting a place to live and how to organize their lives."

In one dream, people were moving to the USA. The person having the dream was not going and said to the people who were that, when they returned, they would speak a different language; we will no longer understand you. There the dream ended.

The participants spoke of their own helplessness, incapacities, and experiences of being left out, even embarrassment and feelings of anger that digital living produces. Digitalization changes structures so fast that no normal person can keep abreast of the changes. Programmes do not function properly; because of hackers and electrical failures service is unavailable. People become impatient and blame themselves when they do not know how or feel they cannot learn. They become embarrassed when they cannot get help to solve the problem and can do nothing but wait until the service once again begins to work, for example, when trying to get money from an ATM. Everyday life is easier but is also more difficult.

Hypothesis 1

The breaking down of borders, making movement easier, has meant that nationalities, cultures, and religions have become mixed in a way that people have not been ready for. In place of the familiar and safe, people face the unfamiliar and strange, which produces feelings of not belonging and being misunderstood. It awakens primitive feelings: on one hand, anxiety, fear and distress and, on the other, anger and envy, when they realize that others have something which they themselves do not have. The foundations of identity are shaken.

Hypothesis 2

A digital network as the administrator of the structures of society is fragile and easily attacked. When these structures break down, people are without hope unless there is some sort of "safety net" for them. A digital network is primarily an instrument for verbal communication and leaves people as emotional creatures without taking into consideration the produced indifference among them. Intercommunication becomes superficial in a way that leaves them internally alone. In addition, the bases of their identity become unstable.

Theme 2. Everything is seen and gets under the skin – how can we attain safety under such circumstances?

Analysis

The shared experiences as global citizens living in a digital society continually referred to the insecurity of the structures and feelings of impotence and confusion. The participants told how the happenings in France and other terrorist acts attack them visually daily through the media and become embedded, "when no one interferes, and I cannot myself do anything but be helpless", under the skin. And the questions arise of which am I a part, in which am I an outsider, and what responsibility can I shoulder.

One of the participants told of her own and her work community's collective feelings of guilt that they shared for months when some members of their tight community were laid off. Especially difficult was that, under the new circumstances, she felt unable to express sympathy for her long-term co-workers. She had not yet recovered from this. These occurrences happen every day at workplaces, and a return to the earlier sense of community is not possible. Work and the workplace equals "me and my laptop", a designated work space without personal space.

It was noted that a feeling of safety brought with it the awareness that I

myself have begun doing things and making decisions about my future. "I do not watch television." "I fix good food and taste the results through my perceptions." I have changed from an enterprise that controls everything: time, knowledge, life, eating habits, even what is allowed." I listen to the conditions of my innermost core and my body and allow my senses to affect what I do and what I leave undone.

I no longer worry that my needs and affairs become a focus of the welfare system. I go to the Internet and find there a group where I "can exchange information and experiences about my own illness and its care". My exchange of personal experiences even seems "more trustworthy" than that of the "experts' advice". A young mother who remained outside the aid of the system in Tampere used the social media to invite others in the same situation to have coffee in her home. It was the beginning of what they called the Concerned Café, where women can go to seek concrete help, express their complaints, and listen.

Belief in oneself and the significance of moving oneself through chaos is summed up in the following dream: "I ride a bicycle across a lake with a black muddy bottom, and, all at once, my bike bounces out of the water onto a sturdy rock face."

The participants asked each other about themselves: "Who am I really and what happens to people in a digital society and community, what is my identity based on, what can break it down and what can build it up?" One of the participants had a fresh example. A young worker came to work in her project on a temporary basis. Nevertheless, she completely "dived into" the work community from the very beginning. The other workers could only wonder how she dared to become so immersed when she would soon have to leave the group.

The participants also mentioned children's ability to maintain hope even in dangerous conditions and to act according to their imagination when they are listened to and seen. They should be seen and accepted as they are.

Hypothesis 3

Lately, terrorist actions, regional seizures, organizational crashes, and cyber war are reminders that, no matter what seems permanent and enduring or no matter what the dangers are, people develop and adapt to the realities of the environment. Through cultural changes, such as the shift towards digitalization, people have created surprises for themselves, for example, the illusion that everything, such as life, time, knowledge, well-being, even proper eating, is controllable through outsourcing schemes. People have idealized themselves as being too high. When people then are no longer the target of services

and expert systems, they have begun to move in two directions, toward the physical and a new communality. They return to everyday activities and meet each other in the forums of the social media and parties.

Hypothesis 4

"Man by nature is a social animal", as Aristotle has earlier stated. People need each other, just as they do safety and partners. This characteristic is not tied to language or ethnic group or religion or culture; instead it is an ingrained need and ability that is found when needed. One is the safeguard of the other. On the level of this basic human need, understanding and being understood are not tied to language or culture. If the awareness of that possibility is kept in mind also in contradictory situations, people are able to trust and expect new opportunities. Return to everyday activities provides time and space, producing a "creative empty space", in which new ideas are born for the solution of a situation.

Theme 3. Challenges for ethical and moral viewpoints in collective re-specification and the renewal of the rules for co-existence

Analysis

Comparatively speaking, the years 600–1400 were the golden years of Arabic culture, also in Europe. Typically, there was active development not only in the fields of technology, natural science and anthropology, but also in art and philosophy. Arabic became the language of literature, science, and religion. Ancient Greek texts were translated into Arabic and were saved over Europe's turbulent centuries.

Then a kind of early globalization occurred. Culture became integrated and it stabilized, the Mongols threatened from the east, the trade monopoly was broken, and religion became stricter. People's means of coping began to change Islam inwards towards a closed system, so that development stopped for hundreds of years. For four centuries, there were no marked innovations in the Islamic culture.

Hypothesis 5

From the viewpoint of complex systems theory, an encounter between the European and Islamic cultures can create a wicked problem that has a historical background. The current globalization and cultural breach has now created a new type of uncertainty for the Islamic world. Islam has taken different directions and has had different interpretations, for example, with respect to violence. It can be assumed that all of the most radical groups are the most afraid.

Coping strategies revert regressively; radical groups even shoot their own members.

Emphasis on the provocative European manner of freedom of speech as a solution in this instance creates new problems in that a radical coping mechanism is a radical counteraction. According to Kleinian-Bionic theory, Islam represents a black-white schizo-paranoid frame of mind, and then, of course, coping mechanisms are similar. A more-advanced mentality requires that the condition of freedom always include responsibility. Can it be the responsibility of European culture to respect what is sacred in Islamic religion? Can it act as a container, so that Islamic and European interaction can meet in a state of mind that is more developed and capable of a peaceful consideration of affairs? A million people marching for non-violence on the streets of Paris is a move towards a turning point at which moral and ethical cooperation is absolutely mandatory for a re-definition of the rules.

Analysis

The Paris tragedy of the Charlie Hebdo killings sadly and pointedly challenges the West to collectively re-define the ethical and moral rules for co-existence, so that multi-national, multi-cultural, and multi-religious societies can exist in peace without offending each other. Where should the boundary be drawn between freedom of speech and taunting? Another passionate dimension of freedom is responsibility.

It is difficult to associate collective opinion with a divergent viewpoint. How can people's own opinions of their own conditions and own feelings be brought to the fore when they completely differ from that of state speeches? Courage is nevertheless often rewarded – a deviating viewpoint fits well into a group, and it is received with friendly consideration. Trust is created so that a person's own thoughts can be brought to the fore even though they differ from the general discussion of the group.

Hypothesis 6

On the whole, Europe has changed during the last few decades into a heterogenetic, polyphonic, and pluralistic continent. It challenges society to collectively re-specify the rules for a peaceful and satisfying life. How can we all co-exist together? The dynamics of Western society have been changing continually in a more complex and more chaotic direction. Are we at the point where there is a danger that we can slip into an uncontrollable chaotic abyss?

The rules (ethical, moral, cultural) that have developed throughout history at the national level are not enough. We need new definitions

and agreements, justice, work toward coordination, compromises, a surrender of extremes (own) so that a greater and more multi-valued society can exist in harmony.

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