

Hans Adriaansens Student Award – Report

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Technological change that is one of the spearpoints today's youth is dealing with, according to me and my discussion group of four young students and recent graduates I recently met with. With a multinational and multidisciplinary group, three from the Netherlands, one from Belgium and one from Scotland, all active in fields like sociology, politics and European law, we sat down to talk about the challenges today's European youth faces and what we expect the future to bring. The overall consensus was that we are all worried the future but remain hopeful that we can face the issues coming our way in a generation that is unlike any that came before.

The first question we answered was the main one: which challenges that today's European youth will need to confront concern you the most? Answers varied from climate change, lack of affordable housing, declining mental health, detrimental effects of neoliberalism, the growing antibiotic-resistance of bacteria to technological developments and the rise of algorithm-based media consumption. Young people increasingly use social media to get their news, instead of reading newspapers or watching TV. Most of us were worried about the increasing 'algorithm bubbles' created on these social media platforms, echo chambers where you only hear your own opinion and subsequently become convinced of its validity. An answer to this issue is to follow multiple channels in order to get a more diverse picture, though this begs the questions of how you actually make people digest content not in line with their worldview, and if it is even their responsibility or if it's the company whose algorithm put you there in the first place. Furthermore, the legitimacy of social media as a news outlet is often put into question, but my discussion group emphasized the importance of following credited sources on these platforms. They may not watch TV, but they do follow the BBC on twitter or watch YouTube videos by investigative journalists – same due diligence, but different platforms. That being said, news reports by individuals can be very valuable as well. This can be seen by the videos posted to various social media platforms during the Black Lives Matter protests, the White House insurrection, or the protests in Hong Kong. Videos that provided a unique look into how everyday people experienced what was happening around them, even though most social media platforms quickly suppressed this content. A very recent example of the impact of information gathering through personal and individual social media can be seen clearly in the shift to a pro-Palestinian attitude of an increasing number of people, even though traditional media and many governments still report from Israel's point of view. "Cutting out" the middleman in media could be a new and interesting way of getting information from more angles which our generation can greatly benefit from.

Then we turned our attention to the second question: apart from these challenges, there is also optimism about some of the ways we might overcome them. What current developments make you most hopeful about the future? We all agreed that our generation is speaking out on many important topics and has found a critical voice, even more so perhaps than previous generations, where we question long-standing assumptions about the world. Whether it be fast fashion, the unjust individualisation of environmental issues instead of confronting big companies, extreme social divides or internalised misogyny and

the effects of a patriarchal society. There is a great deal of generational energy to improve the world we live in. We all feel hopeful for the future, and the fact that there is hope means our generation is fighting for something – now that's optimistic. Moreover, going back to digitalisation, one of the positive, long-term effects of Covid-19 is a surge in new technologies. This sudden overhaul of our society progressed digital spaces in a way not imagined possible before the pandemic, bringing about new ways to work, learn and socialise. Aside from digitalisation, the development of medication and research into health has also gotten a boost, we hope that moving forward, progress will continue to be made in these fields to prepare our and the next generations for many years to come.

The third question we discussed was as follows: which abilities that you and your generation of students possess do you think will be valuable in confronting the challenges we face? We all agreed that critical thinking is an incredibly valuable skill that this generation possesses, especially with the challenges mentioned in previous answers. My discussion group also mentioned the importance of teaching such skills to the next generation, a worry echoed multiple times during the discussion as we are concerned about growing inequalities and access to quality education. Another skill mentioned is interdisciplinarity and curiosity, which go hand-in-hand. Young people are increasingly interested in learning about multiple things and understanding social issues as multifaceted problems. Issues in our society are not just political, but also have economic, social, legal and humanitarian aspects, something emphasized by the Liberal Arts curriculum. Lastly, inclusivity and the acceptance of diversity was also mentioned multiple times. Never before has a generation so openly accepted different sexualities, genders and disabilities. Young people of today help to create a more tolerant society by being open to progressive ideas.

The final question we answered was: do you feel that your potential to contribute to society is overlooked, or even dismissed? Is the potential of your generation not used enough? How do you think this can be overcome? My answer to this question in the first essay was no, not really. After all, young people have diverted from traditional ways of contributing to society to new, unexplored, digital paths, which is influencing increasingly larger groups of people. My discussion group didn't fully share my opinion though, and we came to a more nuanced picture as they argued that our talents and abilities are still often overlooked. They felt that in their activism they were often questioned by older generations who feel we don't have the right to bring up new issues or have a critical voice as we grew up without the hardship of a war close by. I think it's important to get over these divides that seem to emerge with every new generation, after all progress is always necessary and we can achieve more together than alone. Perhaps with the next generation, we will be more accepting than our parents and grandparents were. Another important point raised was whether young people actually feel that they are or aren't being heard – most of our contacts are university educated and our international friends are people who were able to travel to another country in the first place. It is important to keep in mind that those at the discussion table share the same traits and that there's still plenty of people who don't get the chance to even consider the global issues discussed in this report. Finally, the issue of performative change was mentioned. My discussion group felt that protests, demonstrations and activism seem to have a big impact with companies and governments being included in the discourse, international attention for the issue at hand and a shift in public opinion. However, once the dust has settled, it often turns out much was political rhetoric, and no real change has been implemented.