Engaged humanities.
Perspectives on cultural changes in an increasingly digital age.

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Summary

The increasing integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) in our society is generating change processes which will have radical implications for our pluriform culture, particularly in the long term. This is why humanities research is necessary alongside technical and social sciences research. The collective term *humanities* is used to identify all language and culture disciplines: from archaeology to gender studies, from literature studies to philosophy, from theatre studies to languages. To perform this task satisfactorily, a form of *engaged humanities* should be developed.

Objective of the foresight study. The foresight study discusses urgent developments in the information society and investigates whether the Dutch knowledge infrastructure is sufficiently geared to them. The goal of the foresight is to inventory and generate research questions, but it does not aim to present an exhaustive list of all relevant problems. However, it does rank a broad range of ICT-related cultural change processes along five thematic axes: *ethics, identity and meaning, language, art and information and knowledge*. The subject of the foresight is therefore not how information and communication can be used in humanities disciplines. The focus is on societal developments and the humanities questions they raise.

Against this background, the main message which the foresight committee wishes to communicate in this report will be clear: *a humanities perspective can provide interesting insights when we try to understand these societal developments and/or try to steer them*. Whether we are talking about new ethical questions which arise because computers with a certain autonomy break moral and legal rules (for example, when these computers disseminate pornography virtually independently), or we wish to acquire deeper insight into the religious, political and artistic practices on the Internet, it is increasingly clear that a technical or social sciences perspective is *too limited*. Major opportunities and challenges will inevitably be overlooked if the developments which may arise in digital environments are not scrutinised under a humanities spotlight. This also goes for the ICT-related problems which may develop in a range of societal contexts and which require solutions. The text box below gives examples of relevant research questions.

Conclusions of the foresight study. The foresight committee concludes that the humanities community in the Netherlands is of sufficient quality to deepen our scientific knowledge of this relatively new research area. In addition, the youngest generations of students are extremely interested in the themes reported in this foresight. There should therefore be no problems in relation to *human resources.* On the other hand, however, there are not sufficient financial resources available to achieve the ambitions set. Moreover, orientation to societal problems is hardly the obvious choice for the humanities community.

This is why the committee recommends that a form of *engaged humanities* be developed. In making this proposal, the foresight committee argues that the humanities will have to orient themselves more to the societal agenda and, in particular, to cultural change processes which are related to the integration of ICT into our society. This does not mean that the classic humanities tasks must be neglected. On the contrary: the form of *engaged humanities* advocated by the committee in fact integrates the three inter-related knowledge values: (1) the traditional symbolic knowledge value, which is connected to relatively autonomous research into the historic and cultural heritage, (2) the democratic knowledge value, which concentrates on holding up a critical mirror to societal developments, and (3)

the instrumental knowledge value, which tries to shape these developments. In these senses *engaged humanities* are focused on the future, aim to contribute to increasing our insight into cultural change processes which are related to the increasingly digital nature of the environment in which we live and work and, where possible, contribute to solutions for the conceptual, normative and practical problems which may arise in the dynamic ICT context.

The foresight committee realises that simply coining the term *engaged humanities* does not solve any problems at all. The question of *how* this type of engaged research must now be set up and carried out - maintaining scientific quality and critical independence - has still to be answered. Whilst other academic fields have already developed some experience with heterogeneous research policy and the associated range of methods, in the humanities much of this expertise still has to be acquired. This is why the foresight committee has made a number of recommendations to this end.

Recommendations. The foresight ends with a number of recommendations for adjusting the position of humanities in the Dutch knowledge infrastructure and for new and vital research policy. These recommendations are addressed to two different audiences. (1) To *the individuals and institutions making up the humanities community,* the foresight committee makes the following recommendations: acknowledge that humanities traditions and practice encompass existing expertise and insights which could make a major contribution to understanding and to shaping cultural changes in the digital age. In addition, be aware that humanities research will have to orient itself to ICT-related issues much more than it has done in the past if it wants to continue to make a substantial contribution to international academic debates. (2) To *the business community, the non-profit organisations and government bodies in the Netherlands* the committee makes the following recommendations: recognise that the developments taking place in the digital age involve major humanities components. Try to take an integrated approach to problems and involve and utilise humanities expertise in this approach at an early stage.

The foresight committee then details its considerations in 13 specific recommendations. A number of them should serve to enable the humanities community to set to work on the theoretical and practical questions related to developing and carrying out *engaged humanities research* as defined by the committee. For instance, the committee recommends the creation of a number of studios for experimentation which should offer a certain degree of temporary respite from an excessive teaching burden and institutional pressures to continue publishing on the same familiar (often mono-disciplinary) themes. The committee also advocates transdisciplinary forms of partnership between researchers within the different humanities disciplines but also with researchers from social science, natural science and technical backgrounds.

Another recommendation relates to teaching. The foresight committee urges that ICT themes be integrated into *all* profiles in secondary education and alludes to the need for partnership between universities and art schools. The committee recommends that market parties involve the expertise of humanities teachers and researchers as early as possible in the development phase of ICT projects.

Finally, the foresight committee is convinced that a societal need would be served if market parties were to develop greater financial involvement in academic humanities research. This does not mean 'selling out' academic values or 'commercialising' humanities knowledge. It is in fact a logical consequence of the diagnosis that humanities expertise is indispensable if we are to rise to the challenges of the digital age.

As an aillustration: some research questions related to ICT and culture

From Section 3.1: ethics
- Which moral problems are linked to the introduction of artificial actors, such as Java-applets and computerbots, which are virtually autonomous?
- Can the term 'moral obligation' continue to play a central part in ethics when the human face is invisible during Internet and other interactions, when individuals are members of a virtual instead of a social community, or when identity can be manipulated in a computer memory or network?

From Section 3.2: identity and interpretation
- What is the significance of the formation of virtual communities for social cohesion and the forms of assistance and organisation in our society?
- which changes in perceptions of religion occur, now that religious institutions are increasingly adopting an Internet presence? Will dogmas become more or less extreme?

From section 3.3: language
- Which factors determine whether 'digital' texts are understood and are attractive, now that they are increasingly composed of both words and images?
- what do we mean by the term 'text', now that internal and external hyperlinks are blurring the borders between elements within texts and between different texts?

From section 3.4: art
- What are the implications of options to digitally 'cut and paste' music fragments for music theory and music composition?
- What will happen to the (idea of) the cultural canon if the role of legitimate intermediaries (such as art historians and museum curators) is undermined by highly individualised production and consumption of art?

from section 3.5: Information and knowledge
- What are the consequences on society of the development of new forms of knowledge legitimisation as alternatives for the classic gatekeeper system of *peer review*?
- How will the relationship between politics and expertise develop, now that the borders between scientific and other sources of knowledge are increasingly blurring?