

In search of ethical technologies!



Intro

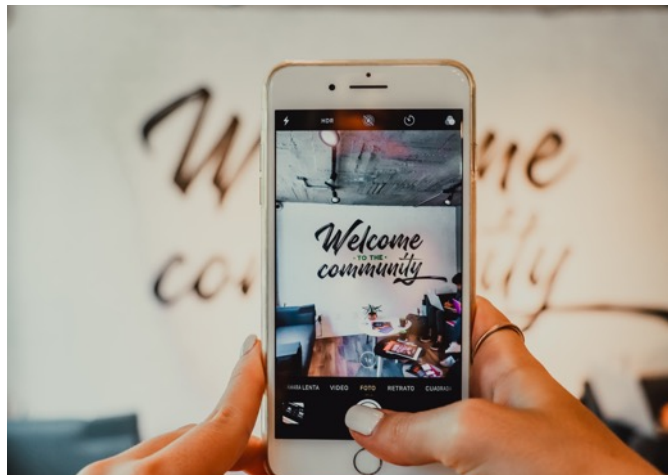
Last year we searched for ethical digital tools for use in *a good foundation* and on a personal level. We were inspired by pioneers in this field such as Richard Stallman, Douglas Rushkoff, Shoshana Zuboff, Aral Balkan and Laura Kalbag, among other professionals and ethical code developers.

Why is this important?

Today, a couple of giant technology companies possess vast amounts of detailed information about us. Almost without realizing it, we've given them the power to do many things with this information (now and in the future). These companies, through their platforms and their business model, are slowly eroding some basic human rights, such as the right to privacy.

"We accept the situation because the service we receive in return is either extremely convenient or keeps us entertained."

-Shoshana Zuboff.



How did we get here?

Over the past 20 years, we've gradually become part of online platforms and communities—excellent for developing our businesses, keeping in touch and sharing information with our family, friends and relationships: "our community". This has revolutionized our connectivity, productivity and business networking.

These platforms offer us incredibly useful, pleasant and “free” services, they are designed to make us addicted to their use and make us share more and more information, because this is the food for their business model: to file, analyze, sell and develop products derived from our data, our identity, customs, values, feelings, etc.

This business model, which Harvard economist and researcher Shoshana Zuboff called 'Surveillance Capitalism' in 2014, was introduced by Google in early 2000, just after the dot-com crash. It was when Google discovered that our search activity, our doubts when typing,

and all the information about our person and our habits, represents marketable value in predicting our behaviours and influencing our decisions. Information, which until then had been discarded, became raw material for products sold to private and public clients.

The model was quickly adopted by all other companies and large Silicon Valley investors. From then on, the technology turned developing algorithms and spying technologies to process and analyze that huge amount of information and to get more and more into our privacy.

The model enters our lives gradually and in hidden ways, without asking our permission and moving in grey areas of legislation. Since these activities are unprecedented in history, they are not yet covered by law. It used to be illegal to open a letter addressed to another person, and in fact it's still illegal in many countries. However, reading someone else's email, the technological analogue of a letter, is not criminalised. And reading billions of emails from 'others', analyzing them and using them as raw material, selling them and generating predictions from them, is allowed for companies in this new technological era and turns out to be part of a business model with economic returns unprecedented in history.

And we accept the situation, says Shoshana Zuboff, because the service we receive in return is either extremely convenient or keeps us entertained, so we don't ask questions. This happened, for example, with the 2016 Pokemon Go augmented reality game, an experiment in spying and manipulating people that positioned the business model and companies as Google even more. The game through its rules of penalties and prizes made people go to the shops of the 'real customers' of the game, who paid for having 'the bodies' of these people in their stores. People while playing had no idea of this business deal. It was just manipulated, while they were entertaining themselves.

In addition to this, privacy policies are too long and very complicated to understand, to accept an app sometimes you have to read 900 contracts (!) of each company derived in the business¹. And so we end up agreeing that they can use (and even own) our data and share it with third parties to provide us with a better experience.

What's wrong with that?

The main point that makes us think that this issue is a crucial social design challenge, which needs more attention and design actions, is that our human right to privacy is in danger, and with it our freedom and democratic system.

How would it be if this elementary right were to be completely abolished? Can we imagine some of the implications of this? How much more power will we give to these companies?

¹ Julia Janssen made the artwork 0,0146: She made a book with the terms and conditions that we accept in one click of 0,0146 second. It is a book of 900 pages with 835 privacy policies. It takes hundreds of hours to read all these conditions. So she proposes to read it together.

What did we discover in our quick-scan?

In our quick-scan, we discovered that most of the people around us (all kinds of people) didn't know very well how these platforms handle our data, or what their business model was or is.

Others said they had heard about it, but are so happy and busy growing their business with the possibilities that these platforms offer, that they don't have time to pay attention to privacy issues or think about what could happen in the future with their data. Some others, from a rather individual point of view, said they simply don't believe that companies would be interested in their personal information, "It's not that relevant what I do", or said they have nothing to hide, "Who cares? They already have all the information about us".

Another observation is that some people immediately think that, by asking these questions, we are against the advancement of technology and the changes it brings with it, claiming that we cannot go back to an era without technology. Putting it in a black or white discussion tone.

"Technology,' according to Melvin Kranzberg's first law of technology, 'is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral.' So what decides whether technology contributes to our welfare, human rights, and democracy or erodes them?'²

What has become clear to us is that people, in general, decide on technologies with a short-term perspective, looking for efficient technological solutions, but don't worry about consequences in the near future that could affect their privacy rights (or those of their children), much less about the "health of privacy" as a society. People just don't have the time to reflect on the long-term consequences.

It seems to be a typically human behaviour: Something like this happened at the beginning of the era of mass production and consumption, when most products and services were conceived 'from the cradle to the grave': The product itself was important, the solution the product provided and whether it was marketable. In the long term or after use didn't matter much. We are now trying to reformulate this concept. Terms such as Cradle to Cradle (2007) and the Circular Economy (ca. 2010), among others, came into use and we are now trying to gain ground in many areas, cities and industries by raising awareness and working to establish a Circular Economy as the new normality. There is still a lot to do!

Designing our public virtual space is a crucial social design challenge of our time. We believe it needs much more attention. We need to find ways to raise awareness and co-design better technologies, and to find new ethical, sovereign and collective ways to use the technology we have, since our virtual public space is today as important as the physical one.

² Article by Aral Balkan in the Kulturstiftung des Bundes magazine.

The challenge is huge, for many reasons, one of them is that the Internet and its digital fabric (software, hardware, etc.) are hyper-complex, and we have not been trained to understand even the basics of our digital (virtual) world. In primary schools children are taught to learn by heart the most important cities in the physical world, but it seems that it is not important to know where and how one moves in the virtual or digital world. Why is it not mandatory to learn about: what is open or closed code/source, or what are the algorithms and what are they used for?

Partly because of the complexity, and partly because of the social and business model in which today's technology was developed and grew, it is not so easy today to find complete "freedom" or to exercise our sovereignty in our digital life, unless you are an expert software developer who specializes in this subject.

But the good news is that there are more and more people and organizations working on this challenge, creating technologies that respect human rights. And there are alternatives and some habits we can already start putting into practice!

Ethical Design Manifesto (Small Technology Foundation)

Technology that respects human rights is decentralised, peer-to-peer, zero-knowledge, end-to-end encrypted, free and open source, interoperable, accessible, and sustainable.

It respects and protects your civil liberties, reduces inequality, and benefits democracy.



We share 3 habits that we've adopted

1. We are aware of the applications and software we use

- **We look for open code or open source alternatives.** Also called 'free software'. That means that the code is open and the developers can read it and even improve it. It's a transparent system, so you can see exactly what the application is doing and whether it's doing what it says it's doing. In general, behind open source programs there are big or small NGOs that work on a donation basis.
- **We look for end-to-end encrypted software**, with the combination of being open source, even better. There are also companies that offer paid services that are not open source but have a good privacy policy (so they don't own or use your data or sell it to third parties), some of which offer free services for individuals.
- **We read the privacy policy and check for updates** (as cumbersome as they may be), if you have to read 900 contracts something is already wrong. We also try to check what kind of company or people are behind the applications. If the company receives investments from large technology companies (Silicon Valley), they probably have the business model of surveillance. There is much more information on the web today than there was years ago, you have to look it up!

After our quick scan we decided to use some better alternatives, knowing that maybe they are temporary options³ or stopgaps:

- We use signal.org and wire.com as chat-app, both open source apps. Signal made their billions selling WhatsApp to Facebook, and now they offer this open source, private chat-app. Wire sells the application to businesses and offers a free chat option to individuals.
- As a browser (we haven't quite solved it yet) for now we use Safari with the 'Better blocker' app of Small Technology Foundation, Firefox (without Google as a search engine) or Chrome with special settings⁴, to make Jitsi Meet and other specific software run, which works better under Chrome.
- As a search engine we use DuckDuckGo. They have an advertising model, but without tracking you. We also use SearX (through disroot services).
- We use Jitsi Meet for online group meetings.
- For file sharing and digital workspace we use Basecamp's paid service, their privacy policy is clear and transparent, we check every update they make to it.

³ list updated May 2020

⁴ [Configuration recommendations \(in Dutch\)](#)

- For mails we use our own (paid) server, and for private mail we use disroot.org, a platform, based in Amsterdam, that provides online services based on principles of freedom, privacy, federation and decentralization. They work on a donation basis.
- We are testing new social media options... Our Mastodon accounts are: @caroisern, @agooodschool

To learn more about the alternatives, this website has a lot of information:
[Switching Software](#)

2. We talk about it

We try to raise awareness with our family, friends, relationships and clients and encourage the use of ethical digital tools. We invite them to use alternatives. This is not an individual issue, it affects us as a global community. We know that change will not happen overnight, it will take time. Being aware is already part of the preparation for change.

3. We try to learn more, keep ourselves critical and updated, and spread the word of organizations and designers working on ethical technologies

Some organizations and people who are working seriously on this issue are:

- Shoshana Zuboff - Harvard researcher and economist, autor of 'The Age of Surveillance Capitalism' <https://shoshanazuboff.com/book/>
- Aral Balkan & Laura Kalbag from small-tech.org
- Think About! event <https://think-about.io/>

In The Netherlands:

- Bits of freedom <https://www.bitsoffreedom.nl/>
- Disroot <https://disroot.org/en>
Covid-19 kit (with some services that does not require registration)
<https://disroot.org/en/covid19>
- Waag Society <https://waag.org>

References and links

[Ethical design Manifesto of Small-tech](#)

[Aral Balkan The Nature of the self in the digital age](#)

[Aral Balkan Slavery 2.0 and how to avoid it in a practical guide for cyborgs](#)

Some Articles

- <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/oct/23/facebook-and-google-are-run-by-todays-robber-barons-break-them-up>
- <https://nos.nl/artikel/2332606-hoe-de-coronacrisis-techreuzen-waarschijnlijk-nog-machtiger-maakt.html>
- https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/k7e599/zoom-ios-app-sends-data-to-facebook-even-if-you-dont-have-a-facebook-account
- <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/02/facebook-google-data-change-our-behaviour-democracy>

Dutch Government research, (Personal Information Authority), on service comparison and privacy in video call applications:

- https://autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl/sites/default/files/atoms/files/keuzehulp_privacy_videobellen.pdf
- <https://autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl/nl/nieuws/keuzehulp-privacy-bij-videobel-apps>

Some Videos

Aral Balkan, in 2014, when some people start researching why some companies got so exponentially and quickly rich:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upu0gwGi4FE>

Dutch Documentary on Surveillance Capitalism (with Shoshana Zuboff) October 2019:
In Dutch: <https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/tegenlicht/kijk/afleveringen/2019-2020/de-grote-dataroof.html>

English version: <https://vimeo.com/385274374>

Divers videos from Small Technology Foundation:

<https://small-tech.org/videos/>

Some Books

(English & other languages) 'The Age of Surveillance Capitalism' Shoshana Zuboff

<https://shoshanazuboff.com/book/>

(English) 'Program or be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age' & 'Team Human' from Douglas Rushkoff

(Dutch) 'Je hebt wél iets te verbergen: Over het levensbelang van privacy.' Maurits Martijn & Dimitri Tokmetzis - *You do have something to hide: On the vital importance of privacy*

(Spanish) 'La jaula del Confort' Esteban Magnani

<https://www.estebanmagnani.com.ar/la-jaula-del-confort/>