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We must spearhead the defence of knowledge and science

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What will characterise the forthcoming decade? Some of the profound trends seen over the past decade will continue to be prominent in the 2020s: an even more acute climate crisis; major population movements; the transition to a more knowledge-based economy; and increasing social inequality.

Many of these are dogged by uncertainty. However, one thing is certain: unpredictable transformations and events that will change the course of history will occur.

In the past decade several things happened which we did not see coming. We did not predict that there would be a referendum which would propel Britain into Brexit and into a confused attempt to extricate itself from European integration. Nor did we predict an American presidential election that changed not just the global power constellations, but also the norms of what a political leader is or is not in a constitutional democracy.

Social media and its underlying technology have also changed our daily lives, society and politics in ways that we did not have the ability to predict in 2009. Over the past decade social media has served as a powerful force in mobilising democratic forces at a grassroots level, with the Arab Spring being a prominent example. At the same time, the same technology has been used to manipulate – and to control.

It is interesting to note how the links between rhetoric, identity and emotions in a new media reality can serve both as tools for promoting democracy and as a means for reducing the resistance of society to seductive and demagogic tendencies.

Fake news is not a new phenomenon. The manipulation of social groups and individuals goes way back in time. Nevertheless, the challenges associated with propaganda and hate rhetoric and their resulting polarisation of debates and communities are far greater today than we could grasp in December 2009.

This realisation also serves as the basis for the Norwegian government's work on a new paper on freedom of expression. However, the problem does not lie with the technology itself. Rather the challenge lies in how it is used and regulated.

Closed minds

This will be a key issue over the forthcoming decade. We live at a time when society is being challenged by polarisation and scepticism about scientific knowledge, which sometimes comes in the guise of contempt for academia, education and expertise.

Large swathes of the population still possess considerable trust in scientific knowledge. At the same time, social groups on both extremes



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of the political spectrum are displaying a reluctance to accept those views, perspectives and facts which challenge their own view of the world.

This development is threatening the very core of liberal democracy. Debate, constructive criticism and unrestricted knowledge building are all aspects of the 'DNA' of democracy. Democracy as we know it requires having a population which is able to engage in critical thinking and a culture of liberal expression.

This is why the university as an institution is so essential for democracy, partly because it is able to ask questions, employ methods and communicate answers freely – including answers which may provoke those who hold power or social groups, but equally because it is able to educate critical-thinking citizens and the professionals who lead our key social institutions.

Engage with difficult subjects

We must therefore strive to make the university a generous meeting place for people, perspectives and cultures; a meeting place where people are exposed to theories and ideas and can discuss and tolerate them – even those that they strongly disagree with. This means learning to deliberate, argue and investigate, rather than reject opposing arguments and opponents.

Neither staff nor students should be left unexposed but should be included in thinking about challenging issues and in difficult discussions which are experienced both inside and outside the campus. Knowledge actually serves as our defence against misconceptions and it is essential if we are to have the ability to see the world through the eyes of others as well.

As universities we need to spearhead this defence of knowledge and science. We must deal with those difficulties which arise at the juncture between knowledge and emotions, between doubt and certainty, and insist that knowledge should be shared and used.

Knowledge and technology are the drivers of current global developments and they need to be used for the benefit of all, to support our liberal democracies and contribute towards sustainable global development. We must use our wide-ranging, extensive expertise in dialogue with the public in order to contribute towards making decisions based on knowledge and sustainable innovation and entrepreneurship.

Why public engagement matters

In an age where the amount of new knowledge and information is growing exponentially, and the gap between those who possess knowledge and those who do not possess it can create inequality and tension, we need to reactivate our societal responsibility for sharing knowledge with the wider public and making sure that the authorities are well-informed and can apply critical thinking.

Having trust in science, expertise and knowledge-based decision-making and stewardship forms the basis of our institutions and our democracy and must thus be strengthened.

For this reason, communicating the role of science as truth-seeking institutions, its methods, uncertainties and integrity must constitute part of our dialogue with the public. Our interactions with the community at large need to be developed and strengthened without losing the independence and freedom which constitute the university's foundations.

The university as an institution has been shaping society for almost

one thousand years. The challenges faced by society have influenced and set the university's direction. The university's understanding of problems and solutions has taken society forwards.

Over the next decade we will also help to answer and solve predictable issues, while we will be actively prepared to deal with the unpredictable. Our contribution to the next decade will be more important now than it has been in many years.

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