

# THE MIDDLE AGES IN THE INTERNET ERA

An essay by Frans van der Reep

As digital developments follow each other in quick succession and impact so many existing structures, the world is changing in many ways. The future may be uncertain, but we can still learn from what happened in the past. *Start with this ...* We usually know what we don't want, but few of us know yet what we do want. Since this is something we can only discover for ourselves, I think: "Who are we? To what extent are we individuals and to what extent are we part of a collective?" Remarkably, in these questions we can find parallels with the Middle Ages.

In 2001, I wrote that, as a consequence of the invention of the internet, society has shown, and will increasingly continue to show, medieval characteristics. We will witness a revival of a "middle age" of sorts. I think this is an up-to-date metaphor, offering an interesting frame of reference and an organizational context in which we can place current developments, in order to obtain a clearer view of what is taking place. In contemporary society, and especially in the business world, the individual and the internet, when seen in relation to one another, are experiencing an unprecedented development. It is almost as if the safe walls of our houses have been suddenly lifted into the air, and we are now looking around at our new surroundings without their protection. Banks, newspapers,

churches and even our governments are no longer what they used to be, all of them seemingly led by primitive ideologies with a bias on short-term results.

As our world changes, our view of the world changes and, whether we want it to or not, so does our identity. The world now seems more susceptible to mass hypes and, at the same time, new connections and new combinations of ideas are arising at an astonishing speed. Here we have a so-called "waving and weaving", where the internet is a loom weaving together all sorts of new combinations while, at the same time, accelerating hypes as well.

With the invention of the Internet, factors like location, time and, for a large part, also cost no longer influence the process of information transfer to the same extent. Information has become available to everyone, free of charge. This has led to changes in power structures. During the last century, the phrase "knowledge is power" helped us to understand a social revolution which emphasised transparency of government and access to education for everyone. It is interesting to see now how many parallels can be drawn to medieval structures, organizations and methods of operation. The Middle Ages were the time of the nobility, clergy and the bourgeoisie. This period saw the development of modern cities, where

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transport was on foot, by horse or by sailing ship, and where people had a simple and clear understanding of their place in the world. With the exception of the church, large scale organizations did not exist. Even the army was often a temporary project of the highest paying nobleman at the time. In this small world, everyone knew everything about everyone – gossip was rife. Everyone was connected via one, two or maybe three steps with everyone in clear-cut social networks.

Nowadays, we can observe similar social networks, virtual meeting places instead of the market place or the village pump. Everyone is once again connected via a few steps to everyone else. Rumor and social activities are spread via Facebook and Twitter. In Russia, for example, the “free word” is spread via blogs and other social media. On livejournal.com, the message of the opposition is loud and clear, even though it cannot be heard on the street. These are large and easily-linked databases through which we know more about each other now than we ever could have done in the past, and it is no longer easy to erase our past and start over somewhere else. YouTube has become the virtual counterpart of the old-fashioned funfair, where we can present ourselves and entertain or educate the public. The internet gives society the opportunity to create new forms of trade and a platform for social activity that puts pressure on the post-medieval structure.

The internet will reinstate a respect for craftsmanship. Since the customer has a multitude of options to choose from, suppliers will need to become the best in their field. This establishes a need for highly trained

and skilled craftsmen and, as such, medieval structures like the guild will once more have their place. Only their name will have changed (virtual community, closed user group, certified RI, RA, MBA, Business Process Management Platform, etc.). Just as in the guilds, the master-professionals teach their student-professionals, and they settle in each other’s physical neighborhoods. The “Baker Street” will return in the shape of regional economic hubs like Silicon Valley.

Self-planning and self-scheduling, also known as individual planning, is often considered a part of a wider phenomenon of chain reversal. Likewise, other forms of self-organization are rapidly becoming more common: no longer are such things the work of the boss. Today, you are more likely to be the boss of your work. Self-assembled teams fit this picture nicely. At BuurtZorg Nederland, for example, professional caregivers meet at “the kitchen table” and arrange home care for the customers in their neighborhood. It is a fast growing initiative and a taste of things to come. Franchises will become an important form of organization, because they utilise the power of combined procurement alongside real business-ownership, meaning that the costs of cooperation decrease significantly. In structure, these are similar to the feudal lords of old, though masked as franchise-givers. Why has markplaats.nl, the Dutch version of eBay, become such a success? Demand and supply have become much simpler, because the product information and the physical product are offered separately. If the information about the product, its description and the pictures are appealing, the customer will contact the seller and only after that will the product be shipped.

That product was offered at the same time to the whole world instead of just to a local village or a city. Not one to many, but one to everyone and, with that, the long tail has become a fact. Just as on [marktplaats.nl](http://marktplaats.nl), products and services can be offered to the entire world simultaneously, making the chances of finding a buyer significantly larger. In this way, a space opens up for small-scale craftsmanship made possible by affordable technology. Customised ordering becomes possible, since information can be easily exchanged to allow customising products. This is the one-to-everyone idea. Because buyer and seller are not acquainted with one another, trust becomes as important as it used to be between travelling peddlers: out of sight, out of reach. Letters of credence, in any kind of form, remain important. Only the name has changed, i.e. peer governance. Business life is taking on more and more of a guild/network structure. There are now about one million self-employed people working without personnel in The Netherlands (ZZPs), and this number is increasing. According to research by the Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving, Utrecht University and Atlas voor Gemeenten, small companies benefit from the quality of life in their surroundings. Social cohesion increases. Generation Y, the digital generation raised with the internet, will no longer work for a boss and will want to do only the things that interest them. The "legal personality" did not exist in the Middle Ages as a judicial figure, so that, at least on the scales at which they functioned, people were dependent on the networks of their ZZP professionals, their guilds.

As we observe an increasing speed in communication and storytelling, we are returning to the time before the invention of the

book, when the writer had a direct connection with his readers. Now writing becomes more and more like blogging, with a specific focus on vividness and images. Blogging becomes the new pulpit, with the e-reader and the Smartphone as useful reading tools. Videoblogging appeals to the generation Y that grew up in a visual era and reads far fewer books than their parents. Many commercial activities have become short-cyclical. And with that, old production philosophies like "sell them cheap, pile them high" are now out of date.

Webcams and Google Earth have realized forms of omnipresence and omniscience, characteristics that used to be only those of the church. The whole world is one global village, and TomTom and Twitter have become our most trusted travel partners. Ebay and [marktplaats.nl](http://marktplaats.nl) are a revival of part practises, a revival of bartering: barter, direct peer-to-peer (P2P) or goods-to-goods exchange. In the world of banks and loans, the same story is unfolding. [Smava.de](http://Smava.de), [Zopa.uk](http://Zopa.uk) are P2P trading places for loans that fit the revival of barter. An example in The Netherlands is [noppes.nl](http://noppes.nl). And a last beautiful example of the development of social currencies and barter is the bank of happiness.

Soon, you will have your own "hearth" – a metaphor for your own energy source – replacing the current central supply. A smart grid will send your excess electricity from your private fuel cell, solar panel or windmill to remedy my shortage of the good: this is, in fact, a step back to the peer-to-peer barter structure. I expect that it will not take long before insurance will be organized via the internet, like the collection of money in the church a few generations ago. Clear, simple, connecting

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and truly giving. Alain Grootaerts discusses this principle in his book "Zin over het KIN principe: Keep it Near". He coined the term "Nearonomics".

The plague has also returned. In this internet age, viruses are traveling with devastating speed and the doctors or, in this case, the virus scanners can follow but not cure. City walls once offered small-scale protection against infection, as firewalls should against viruses. Even the pillory and bashing have returned with the help of the internet: justice departments and civilians publish pictures of wanted criminals and set up blacklists of, for instance, less safe airlines, defaulters and pedophiles. This is already common practice. You and I can easily and quickly be outlawed by every other citizen, with reputations that spread quickly to the international community.

This demands responsible behaviour from each and every party. The Internet has widened the effect of every action endlessly and has to be countered by a set of restraints of freedom in order to maintain a (precarious) equilibrium. An attorney general who acts like a robber baron when he or she violates the rules of criminal law certainly does not help the maintenance of such an equilibrium. And we have to beware, since history on the WWW cannot be erased and becomes a lifetime archive. The relationship between the citizen and the state becomes challenging: what is the state allowed to know about individuals, and what are they allowed to do with the information they have? Who will police the police?

Even the legitimacy of the state can be questioned. The relationship between the

citizen and the state is shifting, with the state no longer automatically looked upon as a trusted advisor. The "protective" government run by civil servants has nearly ceased to exist, and no replacement has yet been found. This pattern of the declining influence of the state leads to a call for civilians to have more influence in the courtroom. The television show "De rijdende rechter" (the traveling judge) is one of the symptoms. Unfortunately, digital lynching and torture have also become a fact. It does not even make national headlines anymore. For example, NATO becomes more and more a military temp agency focussed on guaranteeing access to strategic natural resources for its members. That too is a crusade.

As I mentioned, the plague has returned. Unfortunately, this is also true in a medical sense. Step by step, infectious diseases become a problem in the Western world again, thanks to antibiotic resistant bacteria. As it stimulates global thinking and action, the internet is an indirect cause of this phenomenon. We have become more mobile, and the risks of spreading diseases like Mexican flu that used to remain "local" have increased.

A revival of interest in spirituality has returned as well: there are an impressive number of courses available to help us find the invisible energy and karma surrounding us. Corporate astrology is a booming business. TV-shows like Medium and Ghost Whisperer offer a daily view of the untouchable and un-understandable from the country of clear-cut religion. Whoever does not already believe in ghosts or the undead might start doubting himself. We seem to seek out mystification in a world that has been completely "entzaubert" (disenchanted), as Max

Weber has called it.

And then science: I have respect for the practical and theoretical insights that have been obtained, but how far are we really removed from the the Aristotelian Middle Ages, when great minds such as Bruno, Kepler and Galileo had to pay such a large personal price for their knowledge? How value-free and empirically grounded is today's science really? What does medical science do with the empirical observation that many receivers of a donor heart obtain memories and emotions of the donor, the so-called "organ consciousness"? It takes a lot of courage to take an open-minded look at things and to ask questions with a truly open mind.

With the rise of the web as a source of information, estimating the objectivity and the value of information becomes increasingly difficult. Even Wikipedia, the open-source encyclopedia written by its readers, has started to review and edit the available information by trusted editors.

Similarly to the rise of the bourgeoisie, who took over from the reigning nobility at the end of the middle ages, we are now waiting for a bourgeoisie who will use new structures to bypass the political elite, or possibly even surpass it with new political initiatives. The internet offers a platform, for instance, for a direct plebiscite or for a directly chosen mayor. Pim Fortuyn was the first to try to profile himself in such a manner, and he nearly succeeded. Barack Obama used all the digital tools available to him with good results during his election, and it was widely noticed. In contrast to the "aloofness" of politicians in the last decades, it is now possible to have one-on-

one communication with the voter. If politicians take the trouble to use videoblogging and the rest of the Internet to its potential, they can be a modern replacement for the old "farmers cart" (this was also called the soap box). The Internet democratizes innovation. The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk argued that new mass media lead to media mass, where civilians are easily manipulated and tempted. Recent developments have occurred, on the contrary, with the civilian innovation-initiative, a kind of end-user-driven-content. A wrestling between stability and innovation can also be observed here, though there can be no growth without roots.

The Dutch opinion poll 21minuten.nl offers a good insight into the mindset of the average Dutch person. The big change here is that the citizens are represented directly, rather than having to go through politicians for their representation. Already, without the impact of the internet, many social institutions are being privatized, since on both sides of the table in the various ministries, external consultants are doing the job. We can see that, in party politics, the problems that concern all of us (e.g. solutions to the current financial crisis) are hardly manageable. It will not be the orientation of the traditional political parties, rooted in historic 'debates and viewpoints', but personal opinions and visions that will uncover future solutions. That means, for example, that classical social ideologies (socialist, Christian & liberal, in the Netherlands) are no longer the point of take-off.

No longer will the platform of a party gain the most votes, but the adoption of stances and opinions by the largest part of the population

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will. At present, democracy is power on the basis of the wishes of the majority. What is done after someone actually gains this power is irrelevant. Is this really what voters want?

The medieval "fierceness of daily life" and "rough reality", to speak in the terms coined by Johan Huizinga, appear to be making a comeback. Executions are videotaped and uploaded onto Youtube. Individual self-control and safety are becoming more and more a matter of personal responsibility rather than a public affair. Children develop less and less in a safe cocoon and are exposed to all aspects of life earlier and earlier. It seems as if Lea Dasberg's concept of "youthland" is evaporating, and this is something we have seen before. A quote from Berkeley's Peter Levine: "Being threatened engages our deepest resources and allows us to experience our fullest potential as human beings. In turn, our emotional and physical well-being is enhanced." I invite you to let this quote sink in for a while. Welcome back to the risk society.

These changes have a large influence on our identity and on our sense of safety. Old anchors and holdfasts have been removed, and new ones do not seem to be available yet, or they are invisible. Are we responding to the

questions that our time is asking us, or are we leaving the answers to others? Was Arnold Cornelis right when he stated that we are on our way from a social system of formal rules to a system of self-regulation?

It seems as if the entire medieval development agenda has returned, the same questions but with new answers. From many examples, it appears that new governance and top-down control, or control from the outside in, have been removed or are in the process of being removed. The state loses its function and its meaning, the model of democracy is slowly changing, and the employer as an anchor is being removed. Banks and insurance companies have their best days behind them. When we seek to fill the sense of emptiness and the loss of meaning that these developments create within the existing frameworks, a feeling of insecurity comes into existence for many of us. This is a completely human and logical consequence. However, the good news is that there are a multitude of forms and sources of inspiration to fill these voids.

Lots of initiatives are coming our way. I list here some of them. We can see, for example, how the FNV (a Dutch trade union) tries to organize self-employed entrepreneurs. I have already

mentioned the social media-based example of Obama's election campaign. There will be new questions, such as how to organize social debate. Some social structures will remain the same, such as the family or schools. However, this will demand a reorientation and a different openness than in the past. In fact, we are given the chance to define ourselves from the inside to the outside, instead of from an external ideology in whatever shape.

All sorts of new forms of self-governance and self-organization are coming into existence. We are acquiring more space and are able to make ourselves the focal point. We can speak of a renewed personal connection between origin and destination, and with that a renewal of personal responsibility. We can decide what we will grow in our vegetable gardens, and who you will sell or give to. Instead of "vegetable garden", read "capacities and capabilities".

I will give a few more examples of changing forms of self-governance and the recovery of the connection between origin and destination. Entrepreneurship: as self-employed persons, we are the origin of and we determine the destination of our businesses.

*Energy:* a characteristic of sustainable energy is the connection made between origin and destination. We produce wind or solar energy, and we use it and trade or sell the excess.

*Writer:* As the writer or blogger, we connect with our readers on the Internet. We become like the minstrel or jester, but we also ask whether "we can tell a story this time", adding to the process by our interaction.

*(In)security:* Short tempers online lead to both

the desire and ability of people to play judge to some extent. This an unwanted side-effect of the connection between the origin and destination of punishment, but an autonomous consequence of the risk society.

In many aspects, connections are restored between the origin and destination of money, for instance, in peer-to-peer banking, a connection we also find in Islamic banks. We will see an increasing number of different forms of self-governance and self-organization. Private money, for example the Bitcoin, is a new category of money called "social currency", where financing fosters barter and becomes similar to "social networking".

When our self-organizing capabilities increase, so proportionately does our capability to have either a destructive or a positive influence. With the ability to self-organise comes the question of personal responsibility: what side will we choose for ourselves? The Internet brings us into the "personal age". Because top-down authority becomes less authoritative (What is a chicken? what is an egg?), social power structures tumble down. So the Internet can have a positive influence in the development of initiatives and new forms of cooperation.

The main question for me is whether human beings will be improved by these changes. Or perhaps not – I don't know. I do know, however, that no society can function without beacons of social cohesion, mental anchors and basic rules. Where virtual space has widened our personal scope, the enlargement of political space (Europe, Nato, UN) has limited our communal scope. The need for a person to have his or her own language,

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identity and "beacons" in life – mental anchors – increases as enlargement leads to anonymity or deprivation of one's own direction.

We need a shared vision of what is happening around us, otherwise we will feel estranged.

Unity of perspective means that taking action will become easier. I sense a quest for significance. We have an urge to seek out simplicity and meaning: the vegetable patch of earlier times is an example of sustainability and self-help. We have a need for science and for presence: scientific disciplines should cooperate and look at things together instead of working apart even as they study the same things.

We need to find ourselves once again and to re-locate ourselves in this existence. We do everything around the anchor in ourselves, thus our concept of man. Where cooperation and integrity are reduced to an arithmetical problem for managers aided by their courtiers, and where people are organized only on the axis of usefulness and production, a "homesickness" for roots becomes apparent. This homesickness can take many shapes and sizes in society, politics, business life and in our own lives

What can we learn from this? The paradigm "old directs new" does not work anymore. The inverse paradigm "new directs old", however, only works partially. This creates a possibly dangerous policy-vacuum but also new opportunities. The current situation creates both Al-Qaida and Obama; both fear and hope. Did you know that, with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and now of international banking and multi-national economic companies, old ideologies like communism, socialism and capitalism have been abandoned as possible models for a better world? And that, precisely

in this vacuum, new crusades are being fought? A new fundamentalism may appear, old instruments of control lose their influence and new ones created. But which of these will bring us, as individuals, the most opportunity?

Xenophobia, discrimination, intolerance (fascism) on the one hand, and freedom of travel, information and knowledge on the other, will meet each other in conflict time and time again. How do we defend ourselves from these tensions? Awake or asleep? Do we choose to be destructive or constructive? Both pathways are possible. I hope that the parallels I drew here between our time and the middle ages, however staccato and incomplete they might be, will help us understand our time. I hope they will remove something of the existential fear that comes into existence whenever we fail to understand new things, and to simplify the transition from "old directs new" to the "new directs old". I also hope that from this understanding it will become easier to choose our road with courage. Like I said in 2001: After the middle ages, the Renaissance and the (Dutch) golden age began. Let's assume that the same will happen this time around.

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