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LannooCampus Publishers

Vaartkom 41 box 01.02

3000 Leuven

Belgium

P.O. Box 23202

1100 DS Amsterdam

The Netherlands

www.lannoocampus.com


PROVO TYPING

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DEVELOP
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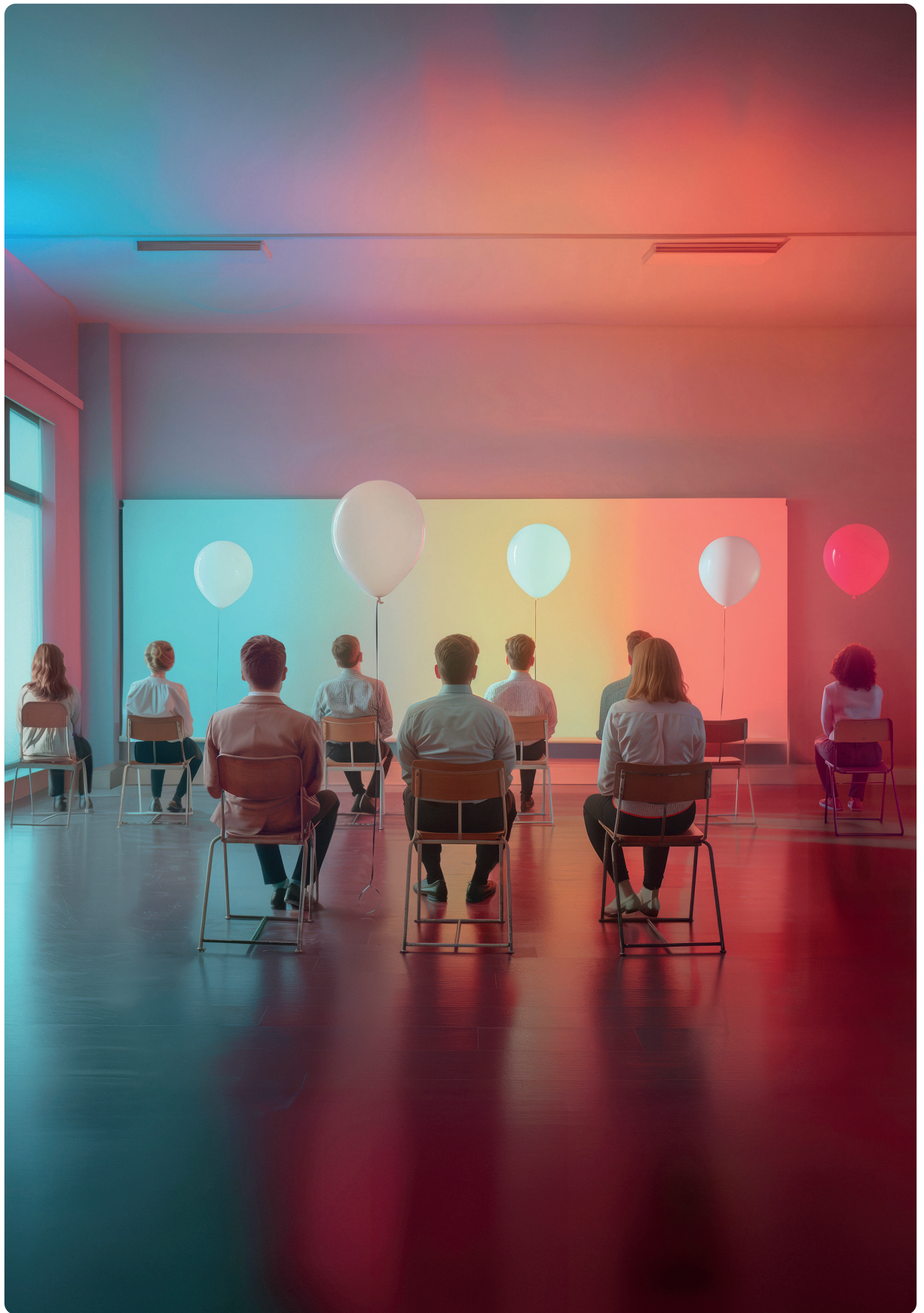
*For Juliette, Casper,
everyone and everything that lives,
the approximately 7.8 million species
on earth, today,
and the many generations that follow.*

CONTENTS

The big data trilogy: Experience, Engagement and Enchantment	11
This book in short	15
7 reasons why sustainability doesn't work	19
1 7 + 1 SUPERPOWERS	27
The power of storytelling	31
The power of wonder	41
The power of nature	49
The power of legislation	55
The power of technology	63
The power of creative collaboration	71
The power of well-being in the workplace	77
The power of investing	83
2 WHAT IF	91
Gilbert's nuclear energy lab	91
PROVOTYPING STEP 1: WHAT IF	95
Nine inspiring practical examples of creatively worked out visions of the future	109
Nutrition: the singularity supermarket	117
Nine future-inspired food concepts	121
3 COALITION OF THE WILLING	129
+Earth+, the Flemish alliance for <i>nature based solutions</i>	129
Nine hopeful examples of <i>nature based solutions</i>	137
PROVOTYPING STEP 2: CREATE A COALITION OF THE WILLING	144

	Nine strategic examples of coalition building	149
	New industry: the blue cluster	153
	Nine examples of limitless potential for the blue economy	159
4	PROVOTYPING	165
	The microbial snack vending machine	165
	Nine examples of wonder from biodesign	171
	PROVOTYPING STEP 3: MAKING YOUR VISION VISIBLE WITH PROVOTYPING	176
	Nine clever examples of provotyping	181
	Public space: commercial centres 2.0	187
	Nine great examples to improve the built environment	195
5	CELEBRATION	203
	Events: the music festival as living lab for the world	203
	PROVOTYPING STEP 4: CELEBRATION - CELEBRATE EVERY BREAKTHROUGH WITH EVERYONE	213
	Nine initiatives and campaigns that invite you to raise a glass	217
	Energy: the hackathon as a celebration of system change	223
	Nine impressive examples of frontrunners in the energy transition	231
	Epilogue and acknowledgements	237
	The beauty is hidden in the intention	239
	The Threefold Wisdom of the Tree	243
	Source list	244
	Illustrations and photos	246





THE BIG DATA TRILOGY: EXPERIENCE, ENGAGEMENT AND ENCHANTMENT

It's September 2020, and when you enter the theatre in cultural centre C-Mine in Genk, you immediately feel that *BIAS* is not going to be your average theatre performance. A queue of actors with laptops and questionnaires at the ready serves the audience with labels, just as algorithms do with people on a daily basis on the internet. Once inside, you will be confronted with a large chalkboard with names of participants and traits such as *Friendly, Hairy, Open-minded, Arrogant, Old, Fat, Dark, Pretty, Young, ...* are connected in a complex interplay of lines. There is also a large disc-shaped figure drawn that is reminiscent of the game show *Wheel Of Fortune*.

Indeed, the performance begins with the jolly atmosphere of a game show from the nineties. You have to be careful, because you will receive sharp instructions on how to engage in interviews with other participants and how to share them with the actors, who record everything accurately. The conversations have something of *speed dating*, and that often leads to laughter in the room. An old lady, a young skater... The crazier the match with another participant who sits in front of me, the more fun. But am I doing this right? Is it for points? The presenter reveals that the ultimate society is being created here. Based on Big Data and Artificial Intelligence, this should create a perfectly matching group of people.

A few times the game is stopped and A.I. indicates which people have to leave. We end up with a handful of people. The final outcome is supposed to be perfect. We have all worked towards it, and all feel slightly enchanted by

that invisible finger that has determined our route. But at the same time, we feel gloomy and empty: The crazy guys who had to leave were the ones who gave colour to the evening.

BIAS was the second performance in the *Big Data Trilogy* by the Playfield theatre company. It made people feel deep down what we all know by now: artificial intelligence parrots our prejudices in a digital echo chamber, and that requires caution if we hope to use it to build important social structures. You can write test pieces or opinion pieces about it, but it only really sinks in when you experience it *firsthand*.

In this book I take you on a pilgrimage in search of experiences that broaden your view and ways you can create them yourself and use them strategically to shape your future. Provotyping is both a methodology and a call to appeal to our imagination, to develop a vision, to bring together a vanguard of organisations around us and to provoke engagement by translating that vision into an experience that will resonate for a long time to come. This is the only way we can take control of our own story about the future.

*From the old normal
to the new sublime.*



1 THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

How do we serve the future with a new story that is attractive and connecting, and to which people can contribute with the best of themselves?

HOMO NARRANS

Put a human with a chimpanzee, gorilla or baboon in a boxing ring, and the human will be on the ropes in no time. Yet it is homo sapiens who, in the blink of an eye, has taken control of our planet as an upright walking primate. Not because we can run faster, nor because of our muscle strength, but because of our ability to tell stories and work together. No one explains better than Yuval Noah Harari (*Sapiens*, 2011) how the foundations of civilisation arose from our ability to believe in grand narratives. We produce knowledge, create abstract ideas and stories, prod ourselves and each other to believe in them, and regularly succeed in making them real. You can use it to found world religions, build cities and settle wars. Over the past 2,000 years, stories have often paid homage to god, money, or nation-states.

Stories are the mental post-it notes that allow you to stick ideas and beliefs into people's heads. Because our brain uses a lot of energy, it quickly goes into hibernation mode when you feed it with all too predictable things. Our brain is allergic to boredom and therefore likes to be entertained. As a storyteller, the amygdala, not much bigger than an almond nut – is your best friend. The amygdala is part of your limbic system and is involved in emotions, motivation, learning, and memory storage. A storyteller sits at a button table like a kind of DJ and gets the happiness hormones dancing. You serve your audience with Dopamine, Oxytocin, Serotonin and Endorphins (D.O.S.E. for short), four neurotransmitters that largely determine how we feel.

With stories, you can:

- 1 spark people's imaginations;
- 2 make the most unthinkable tangible;
- 3 make complexity manageable;
- 4 stimulate people with what is desirable and possible;
- 5 ignite the inner fire;
- 6 unite and engage people around new ideas;
- 7 start a movement;
- 8 and motivate people to keep going.

The list above suggests that storytelling offers the ultimate *playbook* to connect people in, say, the fight against climate change. But when it comes to our future – at the breakfast table, at the coffee machine in the office, or on a TV talk show – it often seems as if we are completely *FUCD* (Fearful, Uncertain, Cynical and Doubtful). More than ever, the future is filled with feelings of fear, uncertainty, cynicism and doubt when it should be a story of hope, possibilities and opportunity. For 23 years in a row, the annual Edelman Trust Barometer – an international survey of trust in society – has shown that trust in political institutions, companies and the media to manage our future is becoming increasingly fragile.

TECHNICALITIES UNDER THE HOOD

If there's one thing we need to rewrite, it's our story about the future, and about sustainability in particular. During lectures, I often do a thought experiment with the audience to demonstrate this. I ask them to put themselves in the shoes of a car salesman in a showroom. Completely in the spirit of Jordan Belfort's (better known as *The Wolf of Wall Street*) sales training, I ask 'sell this car'. I give two options:

- 1 You try to impress your customer with all the special features of this car and the superior technicalities under the hood.
- 2 You try to find out your customer's dreams for the future with empathy, and let that car play a very important role in that.



Whatever the composition of the audience, almost all hands invariably go up in the air for the second strategy. You have to make sure that the customer likes to see themselves in that car. Then he will automatically come up with the rational arguments to justify that purchase. So apparently we know very well how behavioural control works (in this case: coughing up a large amount of money for a new car). And so we know that this process is not based purely on rational arguments. But as soon as we want to sell more care for climate or biodiversity, we invariably dig up figures, statistics and rational arguments. Few organisations succeed in packaging their sustainability story into an attractive vision of the future in which their products, services or customers and their new behavioural habits play a very decisive role. And that is exactly what we have to do. One scale level higher, a new kind of overarching story is needed that consists of the connection and sum of many large and small stories. This is the only way we can inspire every person or organisation to contribute to the greatest adventure of our time: the transition to a socially inclusive and ecological society. Because the stories we tell each other and ourselves shape our reality. Historian Philipp Blom cheerfully turns this insight on its head without losing its power: stories hold society together as a binding agent, until people have experiences that contradict what they think they know. Then the story starts to waver and it's time for something new.

POST-PURPOSE COMMUNICATION

More and more companies consider positive impact at least as important as financial return and are starting to do very daring things in the process. Some companies give nature and minority groups a formal voice in the boardroom. Beauty company Faith in Nature did this by hiring a director who represents nature on its board of directors. Others are going to entrust their intellectual property to a foundation and embrace new forms of ownership such as *steward ownership*. Yvon Chouinard, founder of clothing brand Patagonia, donated his entire company to a foundation to ensure that every dollar not invested in Patagonia would be paid out as a dividend for nature. In creative incubators for start-ups, marketing and innovation departments, more and more 'post-purpose' thinking is being done. Instead of shining the light on their own greater ideal, which has become an advertising concept, they are going to come up with solutions that citizens and consumers can use to create a better world themselves. The major challengers in the energy sector are therefore no longer talking about their purpose 'climate neutral' or '*the energy system of the future*', because then we are talking about a solution that we can

wait another 25 years for. They talk about an ‘energy system for the future’, and started working on it yesterday.

Their marketing consists of the very first step that you, as a citizen consumer, can already subscribe to. *Bolt Energie* is a great Belgian platform that connects energy consumers with local producers of renewable energy without an intermediary. The German company *Sonnen* has the ambition to become the largest virtual power plant in Europe by connecting 100,000 home batteries to an intelligent network thus remotely absorbing peaks in energy demand. Users share in the profits.

During that trip, citizens, consumers and employees will receive a full seat in first class. Communication about future-proofing is – finally – becoming less formal and decent. In the fight against sustainability fatigue, storytelling goes beyond good goal marketing or far off vague goal formulation. There is a lot of creative experimentation with merciless honesty, humour and the ironic exposé of traditional, outdated practices. The marketing team of the plant-based milk company *Oatly* seems to have thrown out all the marketing books and always stands out with ‘brutally honest campaigns’. From ‘It’s like milk, but for people’ to empty advertising space that is donated to traditional dairy companies so that they too can display their ecological footprint. On their website *FckOatly*, they expertly put all their historical blunders and missteps on a timeline to make it as easy as possible for their opponents.

Not only the challengers to the status quo, but also established companies are increasingly turning to spicy storytelling to mark their transformation. For example, the Swedish energy company *Vattenfall* made a parody of cinematographic perfume advertising entitled *Industrial Emissions Face Mist*. With top model *Cara Delevingne* and a perfume based on their emissions that consist only of water, it managed to promote the hydrogen economy in a comical way.

We invent new stories, and then the stories shape us. How can we create a story that gives people space to find their own roles?