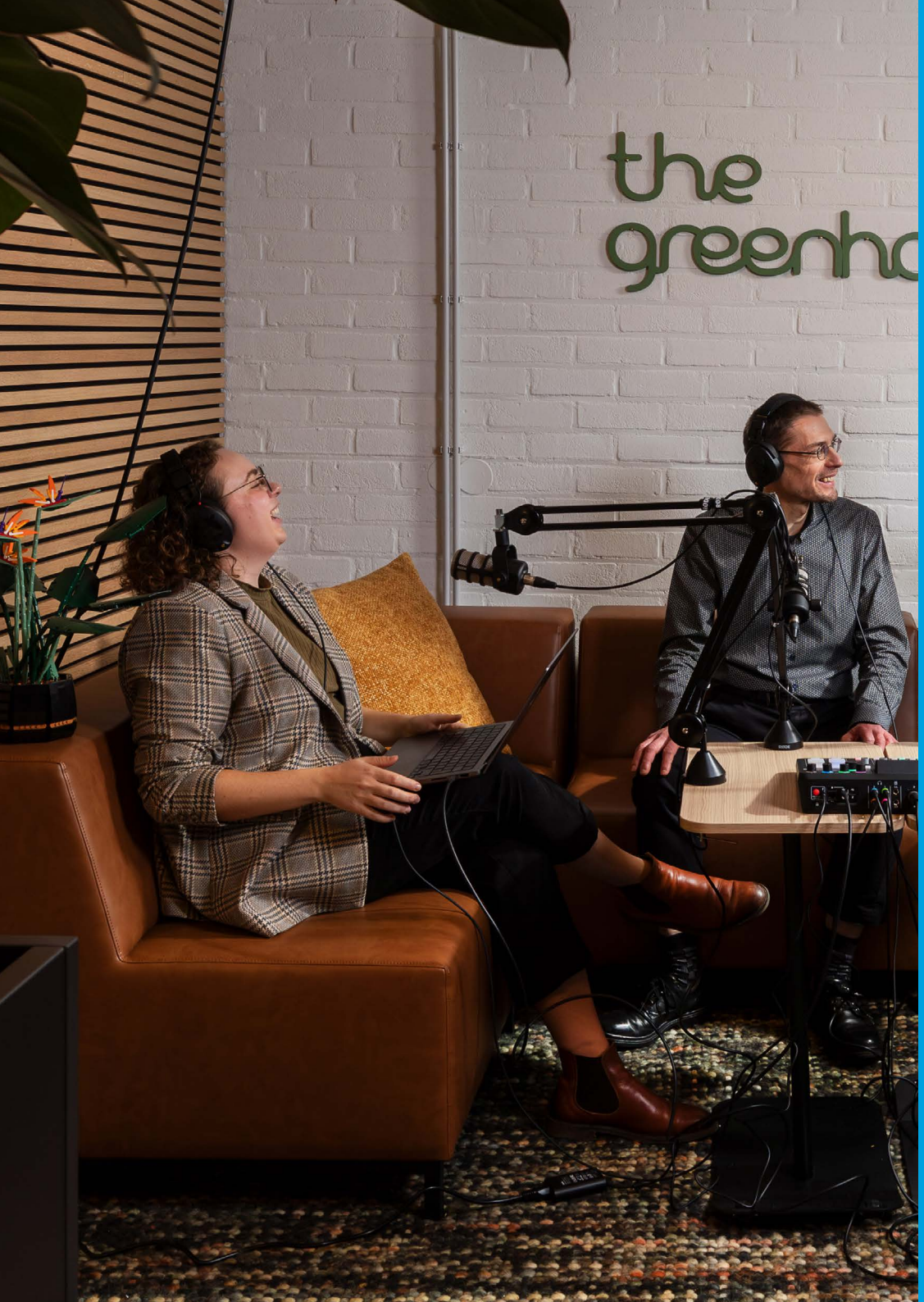
Maastricht University

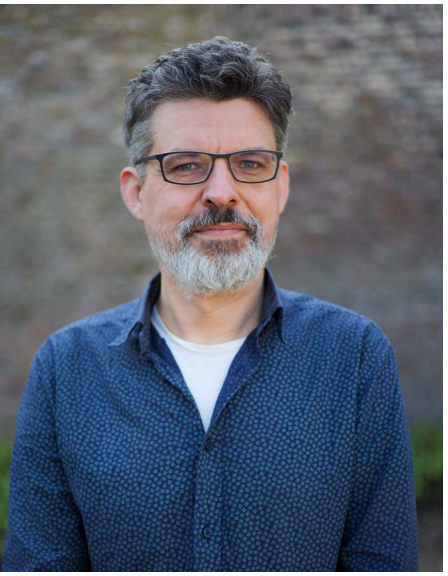
FASoS Research Institute Report 2024

FASoS



Content

Introduction



Turbulent. That is probably a good term to describe 2024. In the past year, the world has proven volatile in many respects. According to some, we have fully entered a 'post-truth age'. It hardly needs stating that in such times it remains crucial to commit to research that is societally relevant and rooted in rigorous inquiry and critical thinking. It is precisely this kind of research that the Research Institute at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS) seeks to foster and cherish.

While the humanities and the social sciences are certainly confronted with challenges, there have also been opportunities. One of these is foregrounded in this annual report: the research enabled by the so-called sector plans. Launched in 2022, these plans brought a significant investment to scientific research and education in the Netherlands, focussing on specific earmarked themes. Several of these themes align with longstanding interests at FASoS: the human factor in new technologies, social inequality and diversity, citizenship, democracy and misinformation, languages and cultures, humane AI, and cultural heritage and identity. The sector plans provide research in these fields with a new impulse.

The plans provided funding to enhance the infrastructure of FASoS's digital playground and laboratory, The PLANT, as well as to extend contracts to early career scholars, enabling them to make their mark. I invite readers to explore the fascinating work of all of them via our website. In this report, we delve deeper into the research questions some of them set out to answer.

The themes engaged with are varied. How do changing migration policies concretely impact the lives of refugees? What frameworks currently exist for 'responsible innovation' in science and technology, and how can they be improved? How do linguistic and economic policy intersect in border regions? And what does a long-term perspective offer to understand the political impact of misinformation? The questions are highly topical and critically important. The answers, our colleagues demonstrate, require nuance and precision.

Of course, the themes highlighted by the sector plans only constitute a part of the research agenda pursued at FASoS. This agenda remains largely curiosity-driven, spans the breadth of the humanities and the social sciences, and explores unexpected bridges between disciplines. This diversity constitutes an important strength. During last year's research accreditation, which was diligently prepared by then Associate Dean Sally Wyatt and the Faculty's Research Support Office, the Institute's research was positively assessed for its interdisciplinarity and breadth.

In 2024, our Faculty celebrated its 30-year anniversary. In the Dutch academic world, thirty is still considered to be a youthful age. Among other things, the celebrations included a symbolical tree-planting ceremony and a Faculty cook book, which offered a culinary expression of the international diversity of our staff. Importantly, it was also an occasion to reflect on 30 years of critical scholarship and its role in a rapidly changing academic and societal landscape.

As we continue to navigate the complexities of this quickly changing landscape, the FASoS Research Institute remains committed to fostering critical scholarship, feeding directly into international, national, and regional agendas, and working with partners within and beyond academia. We do so as a youthful Faculty with colleagues of all ages.

Prof. dr. Raf De Bont
Associate Dean for Research

Research Programmes

FASoS consists of four distinct research programmes, each made up of an interdisciplinary team of researchers.

Arts, Media and Culture

Arts, Media and Culture (AMC) analyses the dynamics of cultural change by studying how developments in the arts and the media respond to socio-cultural and political changes, and also how cultural artefacts and practices shape social and political cultures. Research focuses on the practices in which cultural artefacts are produced, distributed, and received. Approaching these topics from an interdisciplinary angle, the group's research draws on insights from art and philosophy, literary and media studies, cultural history and gender studies, as well as the social sciences.

Globalisation, Transnationalism and Development

Globalisation, Transnationalism and Development (GTD) studies globalisation through the flows of people, goods, capital and ideas that connect localities around the world, with a special focus on flows between the Global South, and between Global South and North. Research focuses on transnational migration bridging migrant sending and receiving contexts, transnational exchanges for development and scientific cooperation, transnational communities and solidarities, and the multi-scalar consequences of globalisation on places. It draws on expertise in anthropology, critical theory, development studies, history, human geography, political science, and sociology.

Maastricht University Science, Technology and Society Studies

Maastricht University Science, Technology and Society Studies (MUSTS) studies how modern societies are shaped by science and technology; and vice versa, how social and cultural conditions shape technological innovations and scientific discoveries. MUSTS research draws on a combination of philosophical, historical, sociological, and anthropological approaches, focusing on cultures of research and innovation. The focus of MUSTS work typically moves between micro-level studies of local practices and macro-level questions of governance, policy, and morality, making it relevant for policy makers, academic debates, and society at large.

Politics and Culture in Europe

Politics and Culture in Europe (PCE) brings together political scientists, historians, and philosophers with an interest in Europe. The process of European integration since 1945 and questions of European democracy, governance, and foreign policy are central to the research agenda. Researchers study the European Union and Europeanisation, contribute to debates on multilateralism and the global order, and take an interest in transnational history. Methodologically rigorous, the emphasis of PCE is on fundamental research with societal relevance.

Graduate School

FASoS has its own Graduate School that provides training for PhD candidates associated with all of the research programmes. In 2024, we had 55 internal candidates. We also welcome external PhDs, and currently have 59.

Research Centres

The Faculty is home to six dedicated research centres. These centres act as hubs to bring together researchers from FASoS and other UM faculties. They also facilitate interaction with external academic and societal partners.

The Maastricht Centre for Arts, Culture, Conservation and Heritage

The Maastricht Centre for Arts, Culture, Conservation and Heritage (MACCH) brings together (art) historical, philosophical, sociological, economic, legal, and practical expertise in response to the increasingly complex challenges facing the fields of arts and heritage today.

The Maastricht Centre for Citizenship, Migration and Development

The Maastricht Centre for Citizenship, Migration and Development (MACIMIDE) is an interfaculty and interdisciplinary research centre, bringing together scholars working on migration from various disciplines such as history, law, politics, economics, sociology, anthropology, and development. The centre wants to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics and consequences of transnational migration and mobility in a European and global context for both policy and academia.

The Centre for European Research in Maastricht

The Centre for European Research in Maastricht (CERiM) provides substantial input to the UM's focal point of 'Europe and a Globalising World'. CERiM is an interdisciplinary research venue creating synergies and stimulating joint projects between political scientists, historians, lawyers, and economists analysing the past and future of European and international cooperation in a changing global order.

The Centre for Gender and Diversity

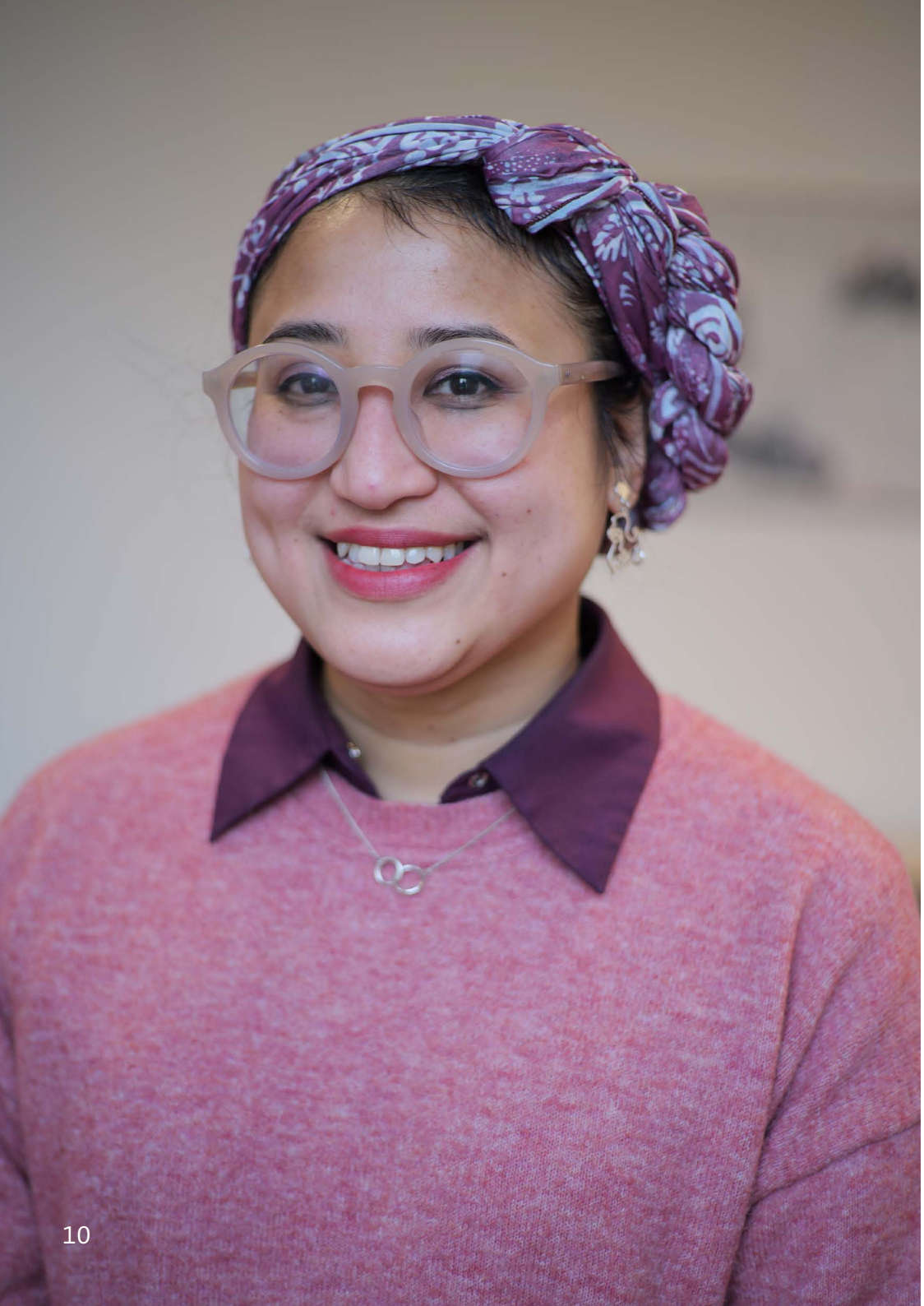
The Centre for Gender and Diversity (CGD) studies mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion from an intersectional perspective. Its feminist research concerns the making of cultural and social differences in cases of embodied experience, art, language, law, institutions, science, and technology. CDG aims to use its research as a vector of change – to not only describe and explain social issues but to engage stakeholders and intervene for the sake of social justice.

The Maastricht Centre for the Innovation of Classical Music

The Maastricht Centre for the Innovation of Classical Music (MCICM) studies the dynamics behind changing classical music practices and their societal contexts, and works with orchestras and others to actively shape classical music futures. To do so, MCICM combines academic research on innovation of performance practices with artistic research to renew classical music practices and music education in artistically relevant ways.

The Centre for the Social History of Limburg

The Centre for the Social History of Limburg (SHCL) is a documentation and research centre that focuses on the history of Limburg and neighbouring regions from the 18th century until the present day. It offers expertise and assistance for academic researchers and the general public by providing access to historical sources, maintaining a library collection, and the publication of an academic yearbook.



Us and them: Indonesia's migration policy

This interview was adapted to fit the layout of this report. For the full interview, please see here.

Mahardhika Sjamsoe'oed Sadjad

Mahardhika Sjamsoe'oed Sadjad, Assistant Professor of Transnational Migration and Social Inequalities, looks at how people's movements and mobilities shape and are shaped by social inequalities. "I investigate people's experiences of moving between countries and encounters between the people who move and the societies that host them."

"An interesting case study is Indonesia. With a population of over 280 million people, Indonesia has about 13,000 refugees. That's not a lot, especially when compared to other countries in the region, like Malaysia and Thailand, so why would this even merit attention? I find it interesting that even a small population of refugees can garner a lot of media attention and frame discussions and policies pertinent to the handling of refugees – especially when there are competing narratives of solidarity and tensions between locals and refugees."

Self-reliance of refugees

Traditionally, research on refugee entrepreneurship examines how refugees start businesses after resettling in a new country. However, Mahardhika's research takes a different approach by looking at refugees still in transit – those stuck for years, or even decades, in countries where refugees have only limited rights and no pathway to citizenship. In Indonesia, these individuals are called 'independent refugees' (*pengungsi mandiri*) because they are not living in government-sanctioned accommodations nor relying (entirely) on aid for sustenance. Despite the term 'independent' that emphasises refugees' ability of being self-reliant, in reality, they have no legal access to employment and financial services, and only limited access to education. They must find ways to support themselves while navigating a precarious existence.

Some refugees manage to start small businesses, within the informal economy, but these enterprises come with risks. "For example, a refugee in Indonesia who successfully created a business making handmade accessories faced major >>

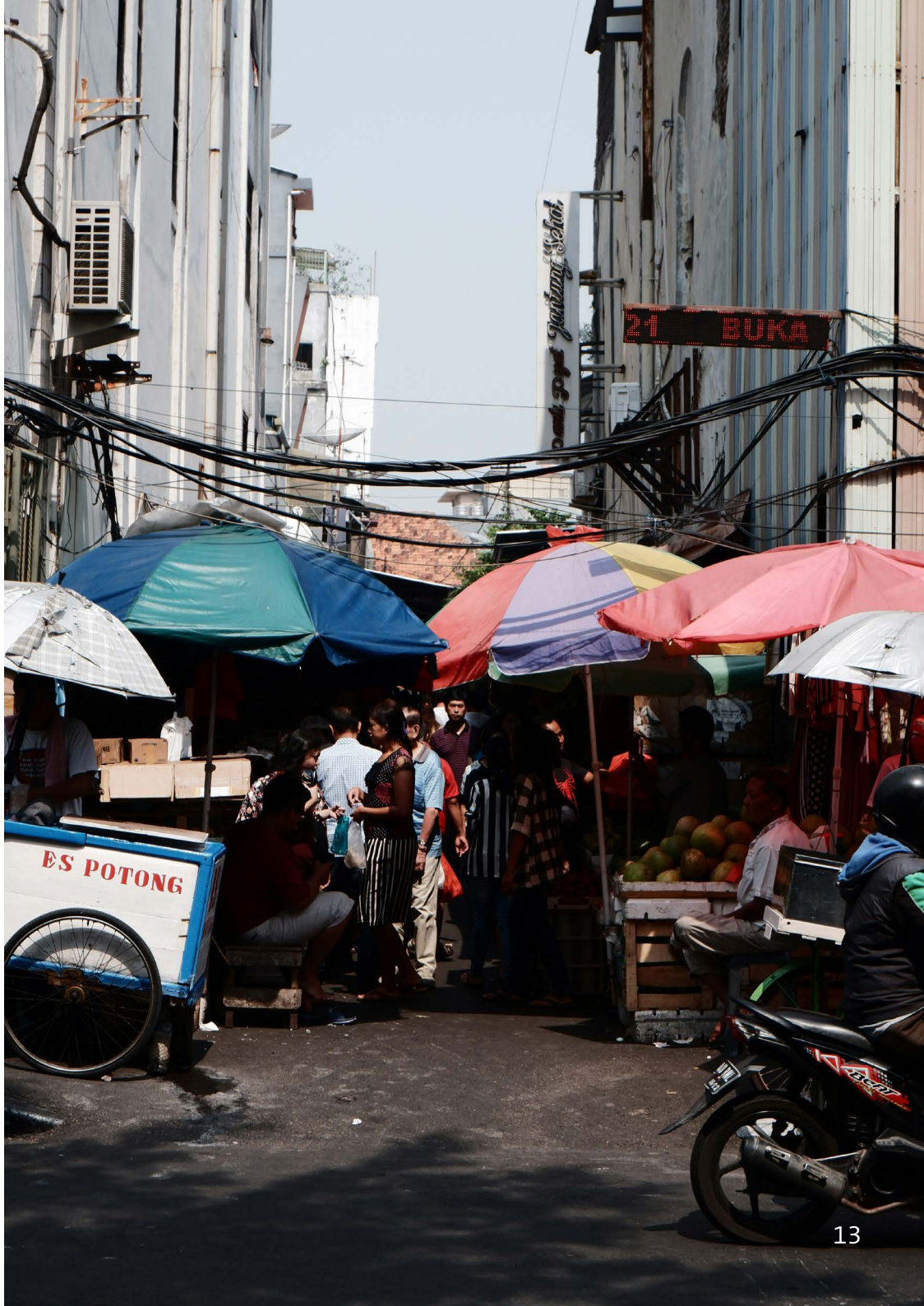
challenges – she couldn't open a bank account, had no legal protection when her designs were appropriated by local businesses, and couldn't plan for long-term growth because she didn't know how long she would be stuck in transit. Some refugees are even detained because their enterprises are reported for being in competition with local businesses. On top of that, Indonesian policy offers no pathway for refugees to become permanent residents or citizens. Instead, the government tolerates their presence without guaranteeing their rights, assuming they will eventually be resettled elsewhere."

Who to help

This resettlement has, however, become increasingly rare. "In 2014, Australia, a primary destination for refugees transiting through Indonesia, stopped accepting refugees registered in Indonesia. This left thousands stranded with no clear future. International organisations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) provide some housing and financial assistance, but only for less than half of the refugee population in Indonesia and often at a level below the local minimum wage to avoid backlash from Indonesian citizens who struggle economically."

According to Mahardhika, "local communities sometimes view refugees as competitors for jobs or resources. At the same time, refugees are frustrated with the UNHCR for failing to resettle them, even though the real issue lies with a global decline of support and resettlement opportunities for refugees. In 2015 and 2020, when Indonesia experienced an influx of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, there were reports of the Indonesian government pushing back boats full of asylum seekers. At the time, local fishermen in Aceh, North Sumatra, following traditional maritime customs rather than modern state laws, rescued them out of a sense of solidarity and this received international praise. While this can be seen as heartwarming, this 'solidarity' is fragile. In 2023, local villagers were reported to have pushed asylum seekers' boats back to sea after offering some basic provisions."

"This raises broader questions: Who deserves help? Should governments prioritise their own citizens, or should those in the most desperate situations be helped, regardless of nationality? Many Indonesian volunteers assisting refugees face criticism from their friends and families, who argue that there are already many poor Indonesians in need. Such debates reflect deeper societal struggles over identity, morality, and responsibility." <<



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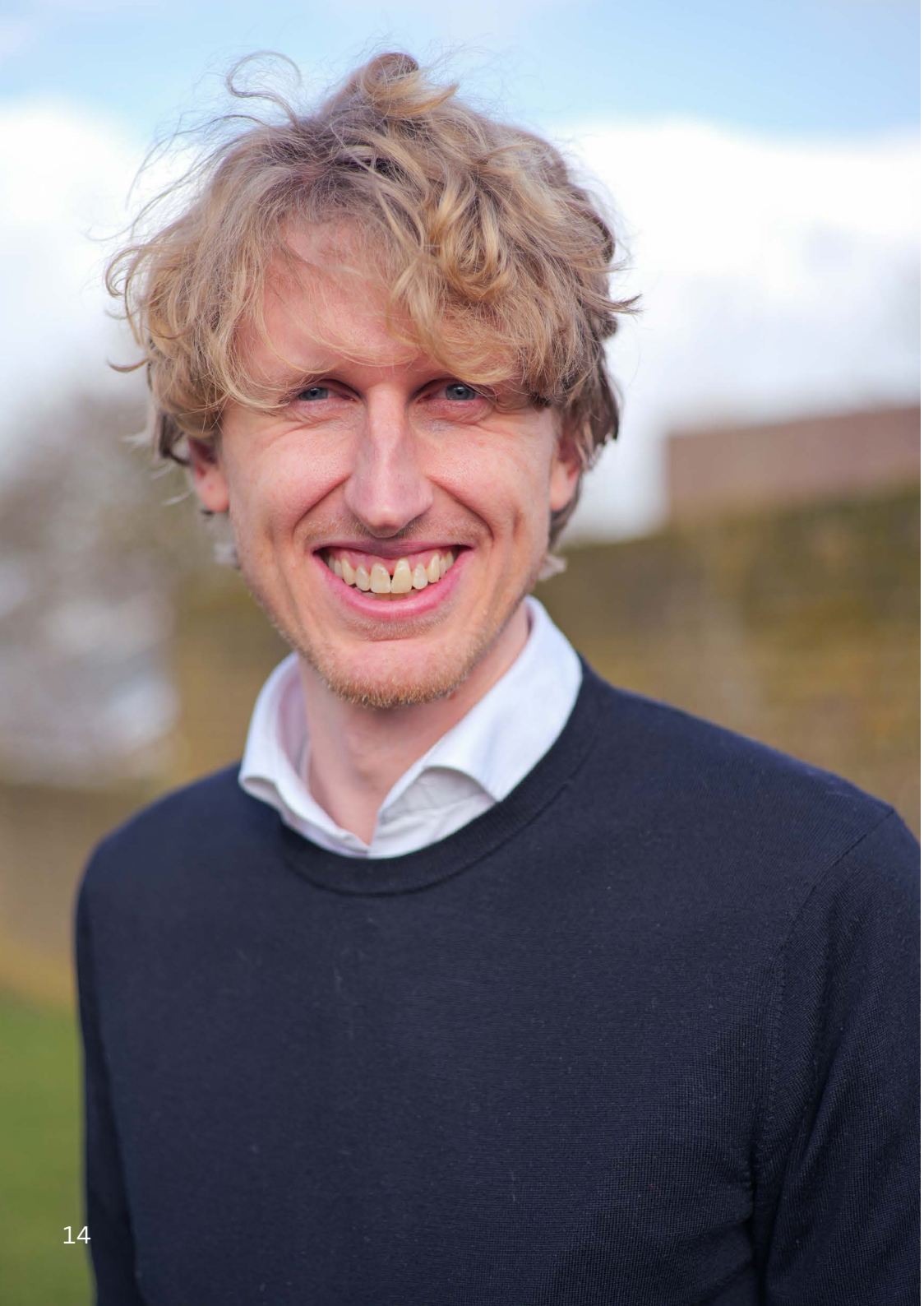

Disinformation and democracy: Rethinking truth in a digital age

Betto van Waarden

This interview was adapted to fit the layout of this report. For the full interview, please see here.

In recent years, disinformation has become one of the most pressing challenges to democracy. The explosion of misleading narratives following the Brexit referendum and the 2016 election of Donald Trump catapulted the issue into mainstream discourse. “However,” Betto van Waarden, Assistant Professor of History, explains, “disinformation is not a new phenomenon, even though we treat it as such. Moreover, while fact-checking and countering disinformation are crucial, we need to look at the broader picture. The assumption that democracy functions smoothly as long as we have facts is inaccurate. Instead, we must recognise that democracy is not governed by an objective ‘truth’ but by competing worldviews.”

The myth of a truth-based democracy

A common belief is that in the ‘good old days’, democracy functioned on the basis of correct information and truth. But this idea is more nostalgic myth than reality. “Honestly, we never had that,” says Betto. “Democracy exists because we have competing worldviews.” He adds: “facts are important, but facts do not speak for themselves and do not lead to automatic policy outcomes; facts need to be interpreted and their policy implications need to be debated democratically by people with conflicting views of social reality.”

Truth in democracy has always been a battleground – who defines it, who controls it, and how it evolves over time. Disinformation is not just about falsehoods but about power: who gets to control the dominant narrative. “Democracy is not rule by truth, but rule by the people,” Betto explains. “The truth of the political establishment has often undermined the truths of others, like women and minorities.” >>

The complexity of disinformation

Research on disinformation is highly fragmented. People's beliefs are not formed solely by exposure to fake news but are shaped by a complex web of social influences over time – family, friends, and social media. This makes disinformation difficult to measure. "If you show someone one example of fake news, their overall worldview won't immediately change," Betto notes.

What we now call 'disinformation' was once known as propaganda. How do media and politicians shape public opinion? In the past, governments tried to control narratives directly. "A century ago, the Germans carefully recorded how much they spent on bribing newspapers internationally," Betto explains. "They even monitored what the French, British, and Russians were paying for media influence. Behind the scenes, the German government also did everything in its power to control news agencies that distributed information around the world. An American could read his newspaper in New York without being aware that its news actually came from Germany. Major international news agencies controlled a greater share of global information than Google or Meta do today."

The role of timing in information

The issue is not just whether information is accurate but when it reaches people. We live in an era of information overload, yet crucial information often fails to reach citizens at the right moments. Timing plays a far greater role in democracy than we tend to acknowledge. "More information is available now than ever before," Betto points out. "But the real issue isn't accuracy – it's timing. Do people receive the right information when they actually need it?"

Timing is especially critical in politics, and the timing of political messaging influences public perception. "Speaking times in parliament, for example, are often scheduled to align with television news cycles. A minister may speak in the late afternoon – just in time for their statement to appear on the evening news, but too late for critics to still respond in time. The way information is fed to the media is a powerful tool in shaping narratives. This strategic use of timing is not new. As early as the 19th century, the British Parliament was already adapting to the accelerating pace of society, recognising the growing influence of media on political discourse."

"Disinformation is not new, and we have experience in dealing with it," Betto concludes. "The question is: how do we apply those lessons to today's challenges?" <<

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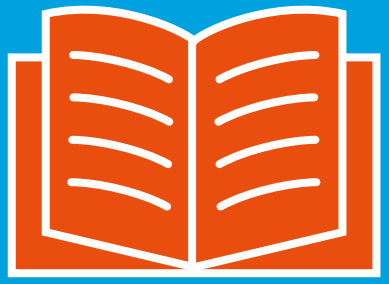
Facts and Figures 2024

Amount of funding received

€4,060,930

Number of researchers, including PhDs

157

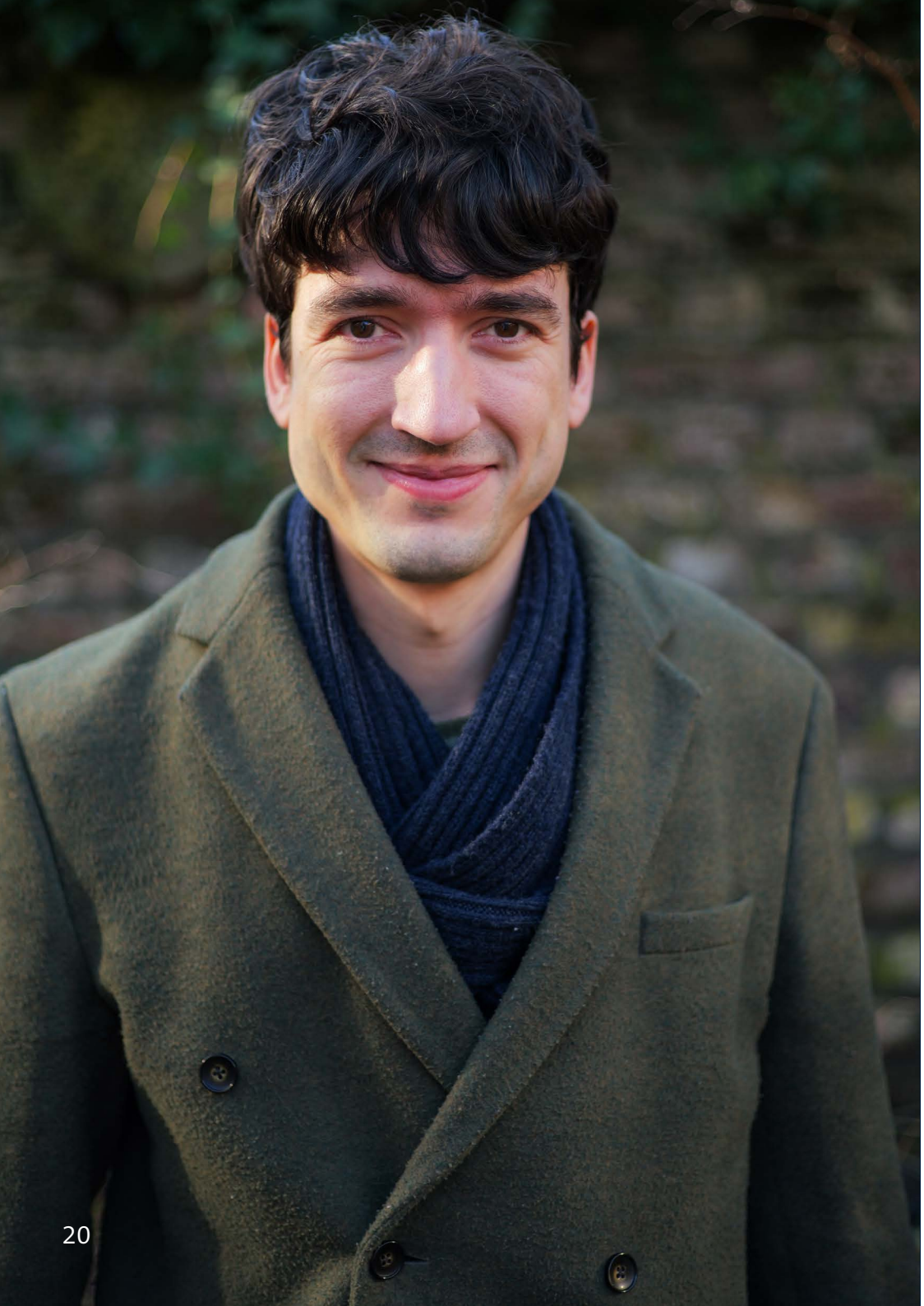


Academic publications

188

PhDs awarded

7



Sprechen Sie Deutsch?

Daan Hovens

This interview was adapted to fit the layout of this report. For the full interview, please see here.

What happens when employees interact with speakers of other languages in the workplace? And why do some perceive this interaction as problematic while others do not? Daan Hovens, Assistant Professor in (Dutch) Language Cultures and Cultural Diversity, researches language use in border regions such as the Euregio Meuse-Rhine.

“I enjoy highlighting perspectives that are rarely addressed in existing research or policy documents,” says Daan. “Not only is that more democratic and inclusive, but reality is often more complex and interesting than expected. That is what drives me.”

Multilingualism in the workplace

Daan has a specific interest in language practices among cross-border workers in the Euregio Meuse-Rhine. “The majority of people, let’s say the middle class, do not work across the border. Then, there is a group of academics who are somewhat more mobile, for example, those working for Maastricht University or the academic hospital. Finally, there is a group of temporary workers and labour migrants who keep the agricultural, logistics, and industrial sectors running in Limburg. They make up a significant portion of current cross-border commuters, particularly in North Limburg.”

This last group had been largely overlooked in research and policy. To gain a better understanding of the Euroregional labour market, Daan decided to immerse himself in a company with many cross-border workers. “I eventually ended up at a large metal foundry in Limburg. The management of this company was always very open with me. They were struggling with the issue of ‘multilingualism’ and were curious about what I would observe in the workplace. That’s how my ethnographic fieldwork began.” >>

Many first-generation migrants, including refugees who had recently arrived in the Netherlands from Syria, worked in this foundry. “They could often speak some Dutch but hardly any German or English. Meanwhile, their colleagues often spoke only German. They frequently improvised using gestures and ‘receptive multilingualism’ – meaning one person would speak Dutch while the other responded in German.”

The politics of language

Daan grapples with the question of whether language diversity in the workplace was truly a ‘problem’. “Opinions on this issue were sharply divided at the foundry. Some employees saw this diversity as a major obstacle to efficient, safe, and pleasant work, while others thought the focus on language differences was exaggerated. I believe both perspectives have merit; it largely depends on how one views multilingualism.”

It is also crucial to consider the origins of language diversity at the foundry. “Until the economic crisis of 2008-2009, the workforce at the foundry was not very diverse. During the crisis, the company faced difficulties and laid off many permanent employees. The management then became cautious about hiring new permanent staff and started relying on temporary workers during peak periods. These were often young labour migrants from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the aforementioned Syrian refugees, increasing language diversity.”

It is difficult to separate employees’ attitudes toward language diversity from this political-economic context. “The economic crisis was traumatic, and many ‘local’ employees did not believe that the current language diversity was a logical, necessary outcome of circumstances. They were not eager for a researcher to come and observe how communication could be improved. For them, language diversity was a problem that should never have arisen in the first place.”

Temporary workers from Central and Eastern Europe often viewed language diversity as much less of a problem. “Of course, one might question how open and honest they were with me. If I concluded that language diversity was a major issue, it could cost them their jobs. However, I had the impression that they were sincere. Many had already worked in various places before coming to the foundry – such as a mine in the Czech Republic, a car factory in Germany, or a farm in the Netherlands. They knew what it was like to be new somewhere and to have to improvise. Language barriers were not their main concern.” <<

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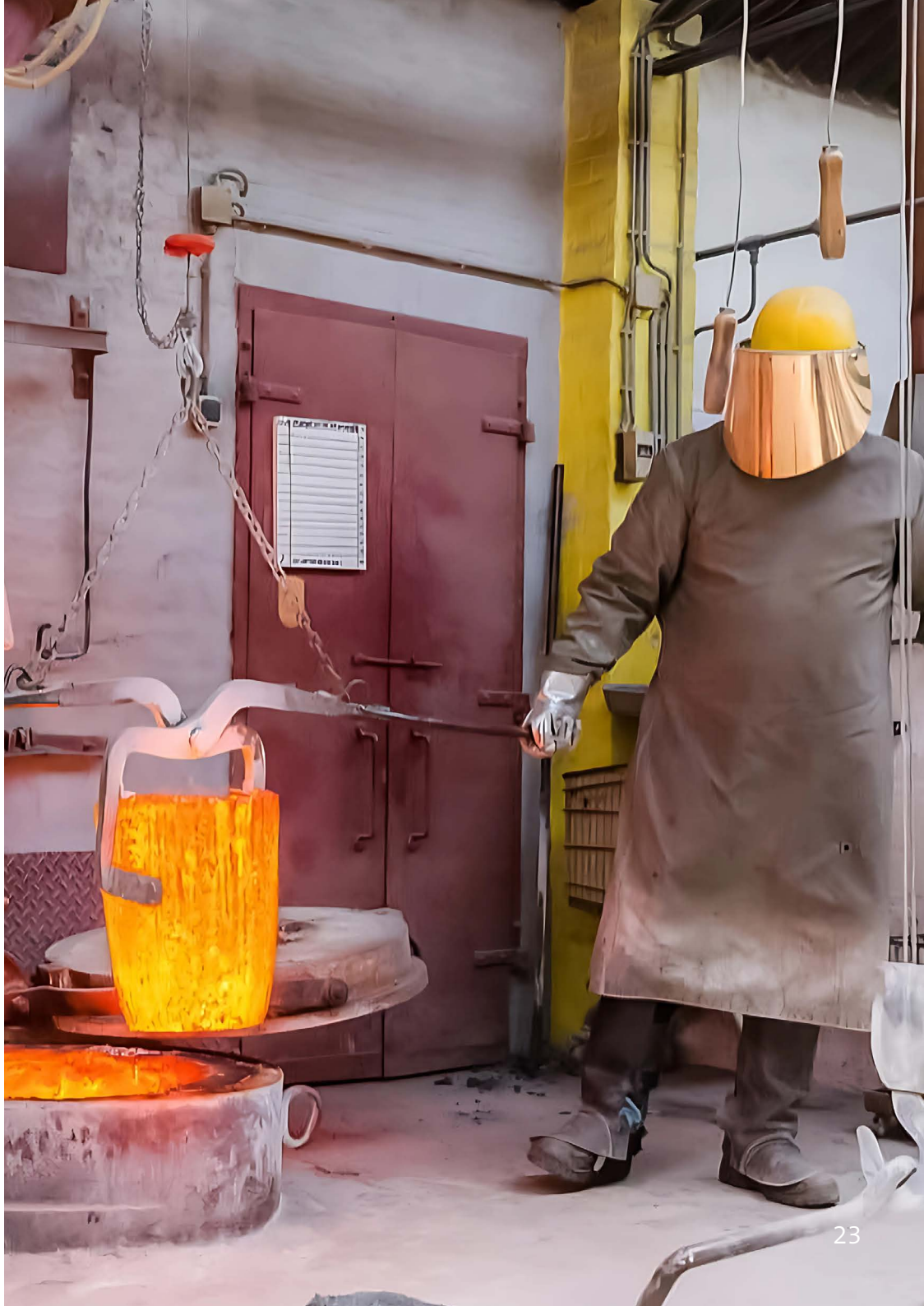
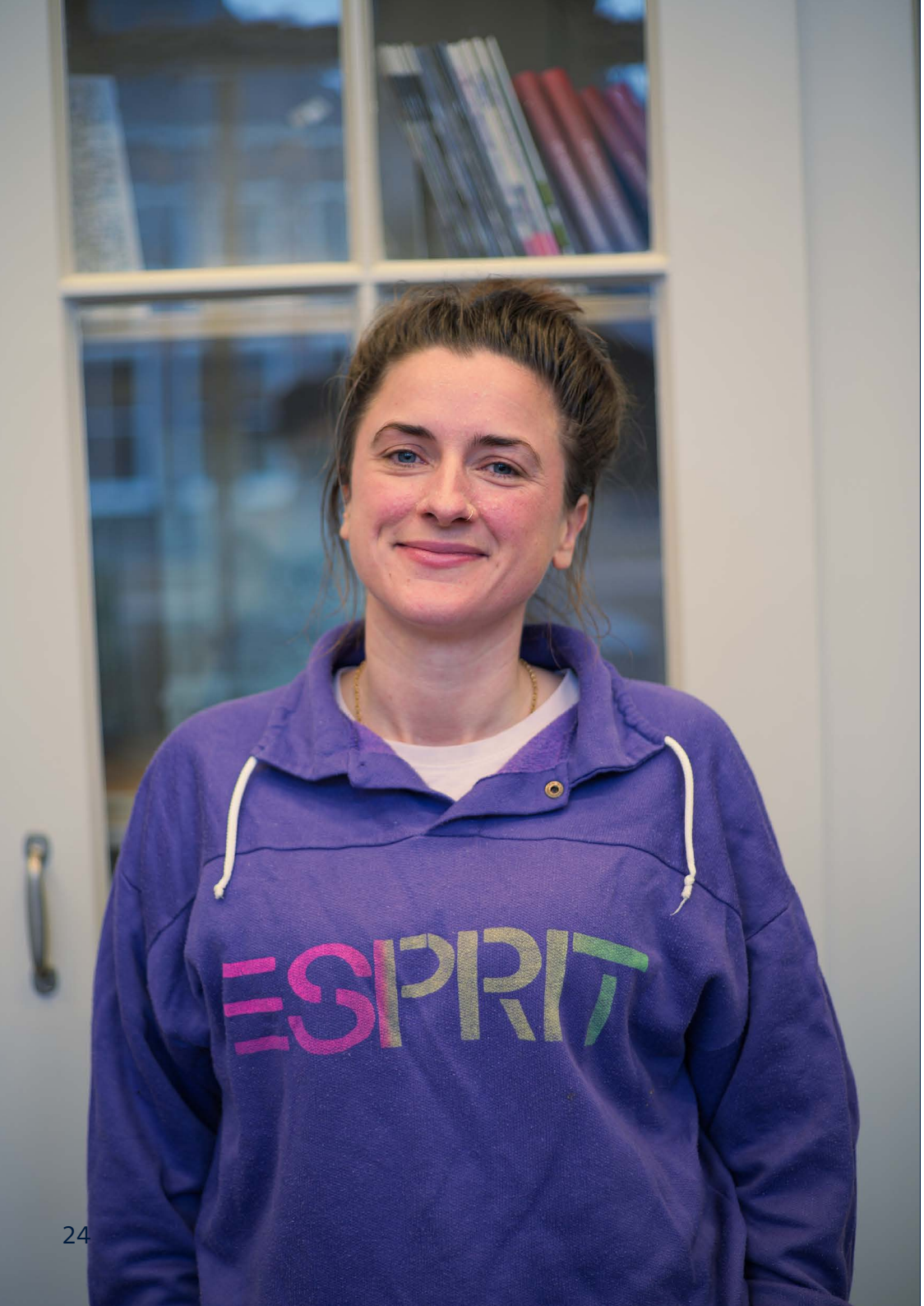




New technologies: Heroes or villains

Dani Shanley

This interview was adapted to fit the layout of this report. For the full interview, please see here.

Hero or villain; utopian or dystopian; good or bad. If you think for a minute about what you see in the media today, when it comes to new technologies, the landscape is full of similarly opposing claims, from public figures and tech journalists, to CEOs and politicians; It is almost impossible to avoid the hype surrounding AI, self-driving cars, cryptocurrency, or virtual reality. But how do we avoid getting swept away in the hype, while at the same time avoiding becoming overly cynical?

Dani Shanley, Assistant Professor in Philosophy, tries to unpack how and why technology is often understood as a hero or a villain, and considers what it means to try and develop technology responsibly and how technological change may trigger us to re-evaluate what responsibility itself actually means.

More than box-ticking

According to Dani, "defining what it means to do research and innovation 'responsibly' is a challenge, as many different factors shape its implementation. Responsible innovation is typically understood in different ways. For example, policymakers typically focus on concrete frameworks – codes of conduct, diversity policies, and ethical compliance measures. These then serve as requirements which researchers are expected to follow. On the other hand, academics tend to adopt a broader, more philosophical perspective, questioning not just whether research meets ethical criteria but also how research agendas are set and whose voices are included."

A key concern in the policy context, is that responsible innovation can become seen as a simple checklist, where researchers focus on meeting predefined criteria rather than engaging in meaningful ethical reflection. "Responsible practice goes beyond compliance; it requires ongoing dialogue and self-examination about the purpose and impact of what you are doing," Dani claims. >>

Who gets a say?

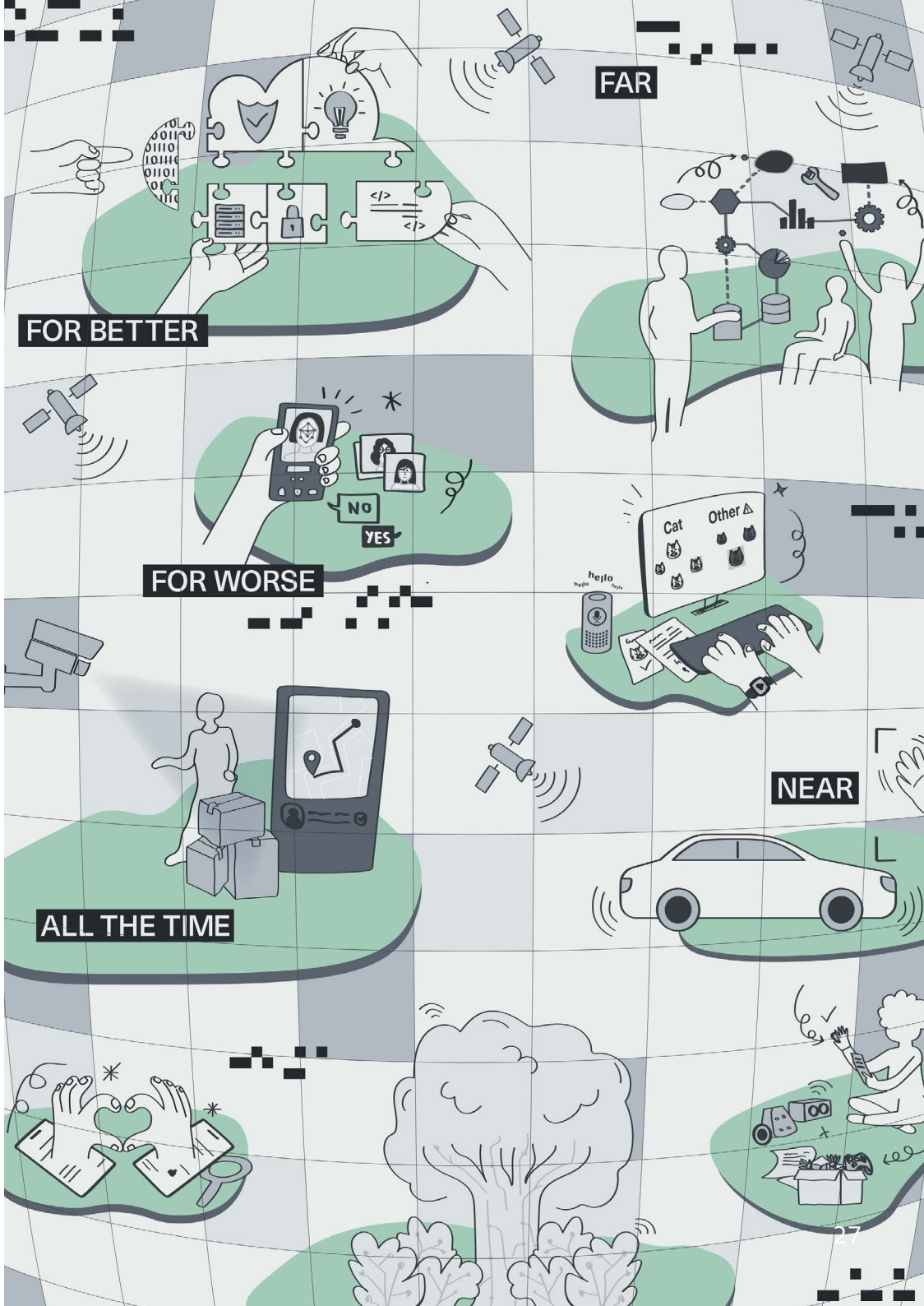
Dani regularly works alongside engineers and AI developers. Much of her work consists of trying to find ways to bridge disciplinary divides, integrating ethical reflection into technical workflows. “Ethical reflection takes time, which can be perceived as slowing development processes down. Companies and researchers working under tight deadlines may resist pausing to consider broader implications. But it is easier to make changes to an innovation in the design stage than in the implementation stage. Additionally, responsible innovation requires funding, and financial constraints can limit the extent to which ethical concerns are prioritised.”

Another challenge is ensuring that technological solutions actually meet the needs of those they are designed to serve. “Developers may envision solutions which are based on their own assumptions, but without engaging affected communities, their innovations may miss the mark. Engineers need to think carefully about how the problem they want to solve is being defined – and by whom. What is the positive change they think they will achieve by developing a particular technology? Who is actually affected by the problem at hand? Have they been included in the problem definition? Can they also be included in other stages of the development process? Success in innovation should not be measured solely by what is technically possible, but also what is societally desirable,” Dani emphasises.

The right to resist

Too often, technological advancements are presented as inevitable, but should they be? If a technology reinforces discrimination, invades privacy, or erodes human interaction, shouldn’t we have the right to refuse it?

According to Dani, “throughout history, resistance and activism have played a crucial role in shaping technological developments, often redirecting them away from exploitative or oppressive uses toward more equitable applications. In recent years, activists, scholars, and technologists have exposed the racial and gender biases embedded in AI systems – such as facial recognition disproportionately misidentifying people of colour – leading to stricter regulation and even outright bans on the use of the technology in certain domains. Recognising that innovation is not a one-way street can help to empower individuals and communities to shape technological progress in ways that align with societal values. We need to ensure that technologies are developed to serve humanity and not the other way around.” <<



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Outreach: A selection

2 February

MUSTS researchers organise 'moving animals festival' at Naturalis

13 March

Faisal Hamadah (GTD) organises, introduces and moderates a film screening at Lumière Cinema of Jumana Manna's film Foragers

23 February

Mariëlle Wijermars (PCE) is nominated for the *Klokhuis Wetenschapsprijs*

20 March

Sophie Withaeckx (AMC) provides recommendations to Flemish expert panel on intercountry adoption during the INEA congress

4 April

Emilie Sitzia (AMC) organises second senses-based learning symposium

21 May

Yf Reykers (PCE) analyses in Belgian newspaper *De Morgen* how the Belgian federal Parliament has placed defence at the top of its agenda since the war in Ukraine

28 May

Laura Ogden (GTD) appears on the *Urban Uncovered* podcast, episode 'Legacies of Race and Space'

13 June

Amsterdamska prize awarded to **Anna Harris's** (MUSTS) and John Nott's book *Making Sense of Medicine: Material Culture and the Reproduction of Medical Knowledge*

1-2 July

AMC researchers organise the first edition of QueerCon Maastricht

17 July

Hylke Dijkstra (PCE) writes an opinion piece in *Trouw* about how the new Dutch government's mentality impacts the Dutch influence in the world

22-24 August

FASoS researchers organise the *Historicidagen* at FASoS

27 September

Elsje Fourie (GTD) co-organises (and participates in) the 'FASoS Story Slam', in honour of the Faculty's 30-year anniversary

28-30 October

MUSTS researchers organise 'Conference on the History of the Philosophy of Technology' at FASoS

Year-round

FASoS researchers contribute to several Maastricht Young Academy events

Colophon

Interviews: Eva Durlinger
Editing: Eva Durlinger
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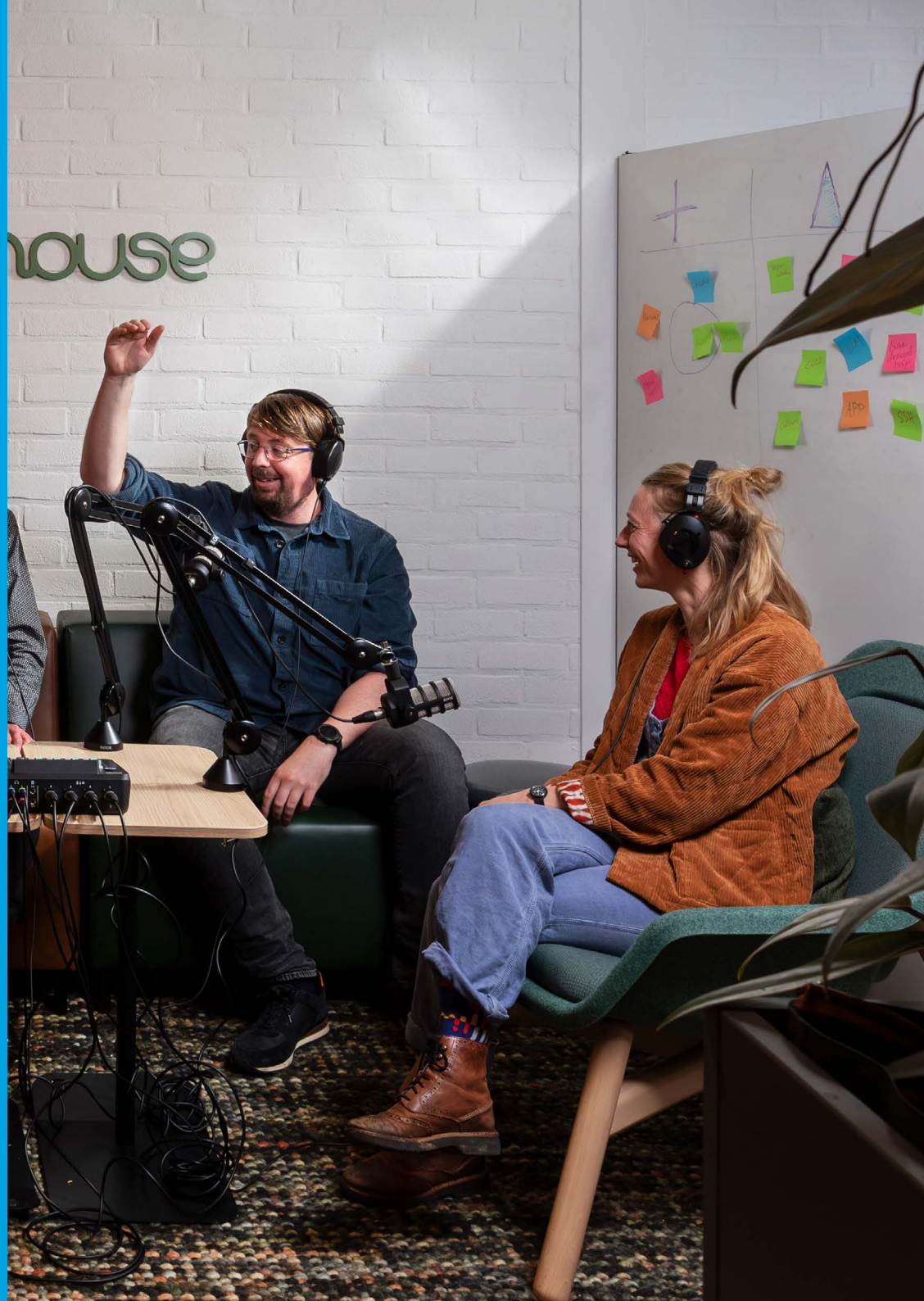

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