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8 August 2015

About my break-up with De Onderzoeksredactie (The Investigative Desk)

End of June the media reported that the board of De Onderzoeksredactie (The Investigative Desk) had dismissed me as editor-in-chief. In a brief statement the board referred to “unbridgeable” differences of opinion about policy matters. In the present statement I offer some more details of these differences.

Some years ago I conceived the plan to found a top-level non-profit organisation for investigative journalism that would a) produce excellent stories and b) offer an on-the-job training program for young talents. With this organisation I wanted to contribute both to the further innovation and professionalization of our trade, and to the search for new business models. My sources of inspiration were, among others, ProPublica and Columbia School of Journalism in New York.

In June 2015, De Onderzoeksredactie existed fifteen months. Our performance was first-class. Our stories elicited public debate, their quality drew attention, one was nominated for the prestigious European Press Prize. Our finances were in good shape, we had acquired quite a few project subsidies and (financial) contributions from media-partners, and we had just selected five new talents for our next Teaching Lab.

Mid-June our prime sponsor had underlined its confidence by announcing – in a letter full of praise – a quadrupling of its contribution to 650,000 euros (for 3 years), in order to support our expansion. A week later the board dismissed me.

In an explanatory letter the board wrote that it regarded my vision on the future of The Investigative Desk as “inspiring” but “too ambitious” and “unfeasible”. The board specifically mentioned my plans for international co-operation, but also criticised my model for the organisation:

- in my view, in an innovative experiment like this, the contributing journalists and researchers – all highly educated and between 25 and 35 years – should play a collective and active role in building the organisation. The best of them should get the opportunity to grow into leading positions in a tow or three years’ time.
- the board – four highly educated professionals of 50+ – wanted to hire a couple of senior “heavyweights” from mainstream media to form a managerial core. It felt that I should take the role of advisor, while the contributing journalists concentrated on supplying stories, on a freelance basis, and not on co-building the organisation.

My preferred model was supported by the prime sponsor (who advised a less “heavy” and less expensive management structure) and by the contributing journalists and researchers, who explicitly asked for more responsibility. The board nevertheless stuck to its plan. And dismissed me.

It has not been possible to restore the break-up. I will now start searching for new ways and new contexts to realise the top-level institute I was in the process of building – hopefully with young talents who feel attracted to the underlying ideas.