

Open letter to the Executive Board of the Radboud University, calling for digital autonomy and independence from Big Tech.

Dear members of our Executive Board,

We, the undersigned, are very concerned about Radboud University's increasing dependence on Big Tech. Several years ago, the rectors of the Dutch universities collectively and wisely warned about this.<sup>1</sup> Since then, little has happened; worse, all Dutch universities migrated to Microsoft 365. With this open letter we call upon you to change course, thereby freeing our university from this dependence and contributing to Europe's digital sovereignty.

We are currently dependent on Microsoft Office 365 for all our office work: emailing, writing documents, creating presentations, making video calls, sharing documents and storing our data. Other significant dependencies exist, like Oracle running our administrative backbone Bass, all the documents that we sign going via Adobe, Turnitin to check for plagiarism, teaching interactions happening via Brightspace. This creates multiple vulnerabilities, especially in the light of the rapidly changing geopolitical situation.<sup>2</sup>

First of all, there are significant security and privacy risks using such cloud based solutions. The authenticators that we rely on to get access to our digital environments depend on transatlantic connections, that may be cut. Microsoft may be forced to turn our virtual office off at any time — as is happening with the International Criminal Court in The Hague.<sup>3</sup> In such a scenario, all research, all teaching, all mentoring would come to an immediate halt. We are also losing control over our data. Microsoft (and other companies whose services we depend on) can analyse all our communications, documents, inventions, and sensitive (personal) data and use this data to build elaborate profiles on all of us, without any public oversight. The fact that the data is stored on European servers offers no (legal) protection.<sup>4</sup> Putting our sensitive data on someone else's hard disk, under foreign jurisdiction, via vulnerable connections, was never an enticing proposition. While many Radboud colleagues opposed the move to Office 365 several years ago, recent geopolitical developments make it clear just how dangerous the current situation is, whereby we are at the mercy of a foreign government led by a whimsical leader, who can force a company like Microsoft to comply with executive orders, or fulfil governmental access requests to data.<sup>5</sup> This puts the whole framework for data exchange between Europe and the US in legal jeopardy.

Apart from these immediate security and privacy concerns, our dependency on Big Tech is fundamentally at odds with the public values like freedom, independence,

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<sup>1</sup>“Digitalisering bedreigt onze universiteit. Het is tijd om een grens te trekken”, de Volkskrant, December 22, 2019. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/digitalisering-bedeigt-onze-universiteit-het-is-tijd-om-een-grens-te-trekken~bff87dc9/>

<sup>2</sup>“Is de Radboud Universiteit te afhankelijk van BigTech?”, Voxweb, February 20, 2025. <https://www.voxweb.nl/nieuws/is-de-radboud-universiteit-te-afhankelijk-van-bigtech>

<sup>3</sup>“ICC braces for swift Trump sanctions over Israeli arrest warrants”, The Guardian, January 20, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2025/jan/20/international-criminal-court-icc-braces-swift-trump-sanctions-over-israeli-arrest-warrants>

<sup>4</sup>Because of the U.S. CLOUD Act, see e.g. <https://iapp.org/news/a/questions-to-ask-for-compliance-with-the-eu-gdpr-and-the-u-s-cloud-act/>

<sup>5</sup>In 2019, US sanctions initially forced Adobe to deactivate Venezuelan accounts, but this was reversed later. <https://www.tomshardware.com/news/adobe-deactivate-venezuela-accounts-us-sanctions,40585.html>. Such reversals are less likely in the current situation.

autonomy and equality that education was built on over centuries — as pointed out already in 2019 by the Rectors. The digital services we use for our research and education shape how we do research and teach, and insofar as we have no influence on these services, we may also lose the power to decide how we do research and teach. For example, Microsoft is aggressively pushing the use of its AI-powered Copilot service in Word, at a time when we have not decided ourselves as a university how we wish to engage with generative AI in our research and our teaching. Moreover, many such digital services focus on personalised education and only on those areas of education that deliver ample financial profit (for Big Tech). All this undermines the value of education as a shared public value.

We do understand that Radboud University cannot immediately change its IT-infrastructure. We therefore ask you to determine a point on the horizon and to work towards it. We ask you to make as Radboud's explicit policy goal to be independent of Big Tech in three years time and to work towards this independence from now on.

Alternatives to Big Tech offerings — based on non-profit motives, public values and transparency — do exist. Importantly, the less we use these alternatives, the more our dependence on Big Tech becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Below we list several things which can immediately be done as part of a policy of increased independence.

- **Locally:** reverse the ongoing transition to Big Tech and invest in local expertise and deployment,<sup>6</sup> for instance by continuing running our own mail server and Jitsi (online meeting) server, initiating Nextcloud<sup>7</sup> initiatives at Radboud, stopping the phase-out of SURFconext, etc. Such local services are of strategic importance under the current circumstances.
- **Nationally:** use your influence within SURF to make the point on the horizon a national goal for the (higher) education sector.
- **Internationally:** work with other European universities (notably in Germany and France) for an autonomous European academic IT-infrastructure.

We like to recall that our university slogan is: “You Have A Part To Play” to “Think Towards A Better World”.<sup>8</sup> Today is an ideal opportunity to do just that: to contribute to increased European digital sovereignty and to embedding European values in our own technology.

Sincerely,

prof. dr. J.-H. Hoepman (employee)

prof. dr. B. P. F. Jacobs (employee)

prof. dr. T. Sharon (employee)

Hans de Zwart (not affiliated with the Radboud University)

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<sup>6</sup>“Afhankelijkheid van BigTech? Daar heeft de bètafaculteit geen last van”, Vox, March 6, 2025. <https://www.voxweb.nl/nieuws/afhankelijkheid-van-bigtech-daar-heeft-de-betafaculteit-geen-last-van>

<sup>7</sup><https://communities.surf.nl/publieke-waarden/artikel/pilot-with-nextcloud-algosoc-and-surf-collaborate-on-digital-sovereignty>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.ru.nl/en/about-us/news/new-campaign-for-prospective-students-think-towards-a-better-world>

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