

How Dutch Informatics fell between two chairs.

In the late fifties the late prof. dr. H. D. Kloosterman proudly declared that "being a mathematician, he knew of course nothing about computers." It is sad, but the Dutch mathematical community as a whole still feels that way. When almost all your best brains ignore a topic, the consequence is obvious: as a result of the mathematical neglect, Dutch computing science is largely populated by second- and third-rate people. It is now so repellent that it is very hard to see how we could ever dig ourselves out of that hole again: it is very hard to convince a bright youngster that he should join that miserable crowd!

The terrible coincidence was that after World War II our electrical engineering wasn't ready either. We had one very pragmatic department, where heavy electrical engineering had the longest tradition, where electronics had not dissociated itself yet from "the radio hobbyist" — by way of analogy: think what happens to a department of mathematics where students only enrol because they are so fond of playing chess! —, and where the electro-mechanical telephone exchange was their only connection to anything digital.

That was a very false start. In their unscientific minds they have now, 35 years later, still not made

a clear separation between the electronic problem of how to simulate a discrete automaton with the analogue means at their disposal, and the non-electronic problem (which they had better leave alone, but don't) of how to reason effectively about a large, discrete universe. As a result the Dutch electronic engineer can cope with neither of the two problems successfully. The collapse of the Dutch computer industry is a direct consequence of his incompetence — that this was caused by suddenly changing market situations is only eyewash — and the telecommunication industry is soon to follow.

The trouble is that you cannot tell this in my country. It makes the mathematicians feel uneasy, perhaps even guilty, and the electronic engineers feel just offended; everybody gets only cross with you, instead of doing something about it.

Can anyone tell me how to suffer fools gladly when I see the havoc they make?

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