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Column Piet takes his chance

En flagrant délit

Piet Groeneboom regularly writes a column on everyday statistical topics in this magazine. This time, he writes about recent events at the Mathematical Institute in Leiden, as reported by the university magazine *Mare*. The former scientific director of the Mathematical Institute, Frank van der Duijn Schouten, as well as The Management of the MI and the current dean of the faculty of Science, Paul Wouters, dispute the picture that is painted in *Mare*. We have included their reactions alongside Groeneboom's column.

“La mémoire est l’avenir du passé” (Paul Valéry)
“Gossip is the essence of ethics” (Marcia Eaton)

A robbery

The year is 1986. Waking up, I see a man standing next to my bed. He says: “I am a policeman, you have to come with me to the police station.” I ask: “Why?” He answers: “You are involved in a robbery.” “A robbery, when?” He says: “Yesterday.” “A robbery where?” He answers: “A robbery at the cinema Rembrandt. People at the cinema saw the robbers jump into your white Fiat Tipo, and jotted down your license number.” I say: “Oh, so the new gangster car is a white Fiat Tipo and no longer the black Citroën?” He is not amused.

Of course the black Citroën was slightly anachronistic, but I had images of Jean Gabin in *Le rouge est mis*, waiting in his black Citroën for his ‘complices’, robbing a bank (in fact, I got the DVD of this movie as a birthday present not long ago; it did not completely live up to my memories). I am using the French word ‘complices’, because I am thinking of ‘les deux complices en statistique’ Pascal Massart and — Brouwer medalist — Lucien Birgé. My speech for them in 2018 is for some reason still on the ‘deux complices’ site of the meeting: see [4].

It was true that, taking a shortcut, I had driven on the so-called ‘Old Canal’ street in Utrecht along by the cinema Rembrandt the previous day, something which nowadays would not have been possible. Apparently I had driven by the cinema exactly at the time of the robbery.

I had to get dressed and go with the policeman to the police station, where I was questioned for half an hour. After this half hour they somewhat reluctantly told me that they did not think that I was involved in the robbery. They also had checked that I was professor at the Mathematics Institute of the University of Amsterdam and mentioned this to me, also saying: “If you had been a student, you would have spent a night in jail!” I tried: “Yes, but professor Moriarty?...” (no reaction), “the opponent of Sherlock Holmes?...” (did not seem to ring a bell either). Anyway, I was released and allowed to go home.

Navigating

We now move to the nineties. The first navigation systems for cars are on the market! For a person like me, who always gets lost, in life in general, but in particular behind the steering wheel of my car (due to a weak sense of orientation or a more general lack of intelligence), this was a great moment. I bought a new car, the men of the garage across the street installed the new system. My euphoria was very short-lived. The navigation system was stolen three times in a short period. I still remember coming out of the house in the morning and seeing the car door hanging sideways and knowing: “Yes, they did it again!”

After each theft I went to the police to report it and to fill out long forms. The police told me that they could do nothing unless I caught the thieves ‘en flagrant délit’ (in Dutch: ‘een heterdaadje’).

So what should I do? Stay up all night and watch from my darkened room my car on the street? And if I would see them do it, would the police be sufficiently fast on the scene?

Since I had to drive to Delft University in the morning (I had moved to Delft University in the mean time, but for other reasons than Aad van der Vaart recently), and actually not expecting the police to be sufficiently fast on the scene, I tried to sleep during the night. But when the owner of the garage across the street was installing the system for the third time, he noticed three boys watching him do it from the other side of the street and called the

police to give their description. But the police were not interested. Only if you see them do it, we can act, otherwise, bad luck (Dutch: “Geen heterdaadje? Dan kunnen wij op dit moment helaas niets voor u betekenen mijnheer”).

After my navigation system was stolen for the third time I gave up on having such a system (for the time being).

The Leiden events

Recently, rather remarkable events occurred at the Mathematics Institute of Leiden University. An account is given in the journal of the university, *Mare*, see [2]. Reading this article, I was reminded of the famous Taoist saying: “Only fools say about themselves: we are the best.” But saying “we are the best” (or in this case “we were the best”) is very ‘Leidenish’. Disregarding the (usual) Leidenish bragging, I found the account mostly in accordance with the information I gathered about the events from several other sources.

A reaction from abroad from my sister, who lives in England: “It is amusing to see that the Mathematics Institute blames the Russians and Chinese, whereas the mathematicians obviously have to blame themselves.” My sister also checks the English of my columns and then often says (if I make an idiomatic or other error): “Yes, perhaps one can say this in America (this because I lived for extended periods in the US), but we in Great Britain, say...” As they say, the two countries, divided by the same language.

Another member of my family who studied mathematics in Cambridge (‘Leiden on the Cam’) and who joined my sister in checking my English, wrote that he got the following impression about the events from [2]: “Apparently there was a minor issue with student feedback, but the university authorities assure us ‘that matter is now closed’. And of course the Leiden academics are the best in the Netherlands, we know that because they told us so.”

I’ll try to give a summary of the events, without using names. The ‘Leiden scandal’ started with irregularities in connection with teaching evaluations. Now, concerning teaching, I can say with confidence the following about myself: “I am certainly *not the best* (teacher).” Strangely enough, my ‘Nachwuchs’, if I may call them so, consists of very good teachers, for example Geurt Jongbloed, Rik Lopuhaä and Annoesjka Cabo. At present the coordination of the teaching of mathematics at Delft University is mainly in their hands, Geurt had the trophy of ‘*best teacher* of the year’, et cetera. They all had me as their teacher of Probability and Statistics. But my former student Marloes Maathuis once told me that I should preferably only teach courses for more advanced students. She might be right.

In his retirement speech [3] Fred Steutel talks about teaching evaluations, and says: “I was always there, I always knew what I was talking about, I prepared myself meticulously, the students were usually friendly — until the moment that they had to fill in the evaluation forms.” He thought the teacher is for the Dutch student a natural phenomenon, like the weather.

On the other hand he had also been teaching in the US, where the students wrote friendlier comments on their evaluation forms, and there even had been a girl who told him that he was *the best* teacher she ever had. Fred then comments: “She really must have had bad luck with her teachers!” But this is indeed also my experience, American students usually write rather friendly comments on their evaluation forms.

Be that as it may, according to *Mare* in Leiden more extreme things happened in connection with the evaluation forms. They disappeared! Ten students declared in conversations with two people from outside (a lawyer and a personnel officer) that they were very dissatisfied with the teaching of a particular teacher and also why. Moreover, evaluation forms on which comments had been written had disappeared! Also, the (low) grades students remembered having given in evaluating the course had vanished!

There is a certain type of mathematician that is oblivious to (mathematical) statistics and ‘blocks’ completely if people (like the journalists of the *Mare* article) say: “Statisticians would not be statisticians if they didn’t want to analyze the data.” The chairman of the Mathematics Institute at the time was also a statistician, and noticed, apart from the absence of comments on forms for this particular teacher (also in previous years, according to [2]) that grades had been changed in the evaluation.

The programme committee of the Master’s study Statistical Science set up a statistical experiment. The students received a text, saying that there was a problem with the earlier forms and that therefore a new evaluation was necessary. The evaluations were similar to the previous ones, except for the teacher who was responsible for handling the forms. Very few students gave this teacher a passing grade. On top of that there were 15 comments of explicit criticism on the teaching of this particular teacher (see [2]).

Based on the information in *Mare* there are ‘two camps’ on this issue. From here on I will paraphrase the opinions of these camps, refraining from giving a judgement myself.

Camp 1 (the camp of the chairman who accuses the Russians and Chinese). This experiment is a ‘cowboy experiment’ [apparently giving ‘cowboy’ a negative connotation here, PG]. There is no proof that any forms were lost! This is a witch hunt!

Camp 2 Don’t we have to believe the students who declared that comments on their forms had disappeared and that they gave lower grades for the teaching? Who made the strange changes on the forms?

Camp 1 The students are exciting themselves on WhatsApp and are obviously in the ‘kill the teacher’ mood! And we certainly do not want to speak with the gossip magazine *Mare* of our university. In fact, the university’s executive board has forbidden us to speak with them!

Aad van der Vaart moved from Leiden to Delft after these events, where he started his new job on June 1, 2021 (I can safely use his name here, because it is no secret that he moved).

This touches on a more general issue. We mathematicians primarily want a quiet spot to work on the problems we are really interested in. But this has become increasingly difficult to achieve. According to my sources, up to eight statisticians have recently left the Leiden department. The institute says: “Business as usual”, “nothing happened”, “we are still the best”, “the statisticians who left will of course be replaced”, et cetera. One wonders what the motives of this behaviour are. One also wonders what would have happened if instead of the statisticians, pure mathematicians had decided to leave. Would they have found other positions as easily as the statisticians?

It is true that the concepts used in probability and statistics are rather hard to grasp. It might be easier to explain to the Dutch

non-mathematicians that minus 1 times minus 1 equals plus 1 than to explain what probabilists and statisticians mean by ‘event’, ‘random variable’, et cetera. Both disciplines (probability and statistics) heavily rely on concepts from measure theory. In fact, I finally felt that I understood what these concepts meant myself when I read Chapter 9 of [1]. And even here there has been a (relatively) new development because of the infinite dimensional spaces one has to deal with in nonparametric statistics and the accompanying tension between topology and measure theory (continuous functions versus measurable functions).

References

- 1 Paul R. Halmos, *Measure Theory*, D. Van Nostrand Company, New York, 1950.
- 2 Mark Reid and Susan Wichgers, Fraud, disappearing evaluations and a toxic environment: how the best statistics group in the Netherlands fell apart, *Mare*, 24 June 2021, <https://www.mareonline.nl/en/background/fraud-disappearing-evaluations-and-a-toxic-environment-how-the-best-statistics-group-in-the-netherlands-fell-apart/2021>.
- 3 F.W. Steutel, *Laatste kansen* (Final Chances), Retirement speech, Mathematics and Computer Science, Eindhoven University of Technology, 1996.
- 4 Université Paris, Deux complices en statistique – Two days in honor of Pascal Massart and Lucien Birgé, <https://www.imo.universite-paris-saclay.fr/2complices>, 2018.

In the case of the events in Leiden there is no ‘flagrant délit’, people did not see anybody ‘do it’. They did not see robbers jump into a white Fiat Tipo. But it cannot be denied that there is a rather large amount of circumstantial evidence, together with ‘means, motive and opportunity’. Like the police in the case of the theft of my navigation system, ‘Camp 1’ can try to keep insisting on that they do not have a ‘flagrant délit’.

But finally, to make a variation on a saying in *The Importance of being Earnest* (Oscar Wilde): To lose one statistician may be regarded as a misfortune, to lose eight looks like carelessness. ☘

Fama crescit eundo

Against my custom not to react on columns, I make an exception for this one by Groeneboom, as it unjustly and negatively affects the reputation of colleagues at the Mathematical Institute (MI) of Leiden University.

Groeneboom draws wrong conclusions, both in the case of the ‘lost student evaluations’ as well as in making a connection between this case and the departure of several statisticians from Leiden.

To start with the latter, the main reason for the departure of the Leiden statisticians was not the issue of the ‘lost student evaluations’, but a substantial difference of opinion concerning several aspects of career development, ranging from the principles in hiring young professionals to the role emeriti should play. This gave rise to severe disputes between the Management Team of the institute and several statisticians which ultimately led to their departure from Leiden.

As far as the case of the lost student evaluations is concerned, I must stick to the *Mare* information, as Leiden University holds the principle, that an investigation of scientific integrity that is closed, will not be reopened unless new evidence becomes available. This principle was not respected by all persons involved as some of them deliberately leaked confidential information to the *Mare* reporter. Since the ‘facts’ mentioned in the *Mare* article

are provided by inner-circles and are not independently confirmed, I would have expected more reluctance by Groeneboom in drawing his firm conclusion that “it cannot be denied that there is a rather large amount of circumstantial evidence, together with means, motive and opportunity”. In doing so he places a person, who has been officially declared innocent, back into the benches of the accused.

By analyzing the available information from *Mare*, I personally would at least have kept open the option that this could be an example in which the concept of scientific integrity is misused to try to block the career of a colleague. In any case, I can take off the edge of the claim by Groeneboom that the person accused had good motives for her action: since over the years she has been active in various other education programs with positive evaluations, of which several were taken online, a motive to manipulate the student evaluation of this particular course is non-existent.

By letting the rumor go, Groeneboom deliberately tried to contribute to its growth. As a member of the Dutch mathematical community, I can’t generate any appreciation that NAW is used for this type of purposes.

Frank van der Duijn Schouten

Reaction of the MI Management and the dean of the faculty

We emphatically distance ourselves from the insinuations conveyed in this column. The lecturer in question is a highly valued teacher and researcher and we are proud that she is affiliated with the MI. Leiden University has twice investigated the allegations of missing comments on evaluation forms without assigning any blame. The case is closed. The previous interim scientific director professor Frank van der Duijn Schouten analyzed the conflict concerning unbalanced career policy within the MI that contributed to the departure of several staff members. He made a number of recommendations,

which are broadly supported among the staff of the MI. The first steps towards their implementation have already been taken. This effort will be supported from 1 September onwards by interim scientific director Frans de Haas (<https://www.universiteitileiden.nl/en/news/2021/07/frans-de-haas-appointed-scientific-director-quartermaster-at-the-mathematical-institute-mi>).

Floske Spieksma, Mieke Schutte and Hermen Jan Hupkes (Management of the MI), and Paul Wouters on behalf of the Faculty Board of the Science Faculty