By Rafael Sbarai Alves (VEJA magazine's website, Brazil)

RSA: What are your concerns about the hegemony of Google and do you still campaign against Google?

GL: Concerning Google it is good to know what new type of media power is in the making here. It is easy to understand the rise and fall of Murdoch's News Corporation because this is all about political power, market share, deregulation of the press, licenses for television and cable and how to turn these eyeballs into advertising revenue. Murdoch's empire is based on 20th century business models of take-overs, distribution deals in a content-driven industry. The internet industry has changed the rules of the games in that it no longer makes money through content. What Google, Apple, Facebook and Twitter have in common is that they want us to provide our cultural production for free. Their added value is to exploit the social relations amongst users. This is what they sell to advertisers.

Our work here in Amsterdam at the Institute of Network Cultures has first and foremost been about understanding this new logic. Before you start to argue against the monopoly position of, for instance, Google (with a 95% market search in internet search here in the Netherlands) and make a case for alternative services, you'd better understand the new way in which these companies operate. After having undertaken a few small initiatives aimed to get a better grip on the importance of search as a cultural practice of billions of people, we still feel that it is early days in terms of a critical understanding of the political economy of Web 2.0 services.

RSA: Why have we turned into "migratory birds"? We seem to change social networks every few years.

GL: I do not think it is sufficient to say that we are restless, less concentrated, nervous and stressed. We are. The mass migration from one platform to the next has simply got to do with rapid innovation cycles in this sector. Internet platforms and smart phone apps seem to have a short shelf life. Look at radio, cars and color television. These technologies all have a huge impact on our everyday life. Despite small improvements the basic design principles of these technologies haven't changed for decades. For some aspects of computing that's also the case, like the design of the QWERTY keyboard or the architecture of operating systems. But others such as the way computer networks are defining social relationships or the incredible drop in storage prices are having their revolutionary moment as

we speak. One day we intensely use an online service, think it is cool and get used to it, identify ourselves with it. Next day we come back and think: gosh, this looks primitive, old hat, why am I still using these crappy interfaces and this primitive software, populated by all these dull people ? This somewhat unconscious mood change can literary happen overnight. The research question then would be how these sudden swings in the techno-Zeitgeist relate to the herd behavior. Important here is the 'tipping point' which happens once you reach a critical mass. Funny enough this law also works the other way around in terms of the implosion of the user base. We should try to find out more about the implosion point. American techno-evangelists will not know much about this. The main obsession of Web 2.0 enterpreneurs remains hyper growth in the shortest amount of time, regardless of the social cost. Why and how their ventures shrink and disappear we usually do not find out.

RSA: Do you believe that Facebook is already worried about Google+?

GL: I bet they will. But I would relate that to the news we heard the other day about recent statistics about a first significant decrease in the number of US citizens that use Facebook. Many people have already lost interest in Facebook with its generalized 'friends' concept. I wouldn't be surprised if they ditched it. Google+ has anticipated this growing discontent by introducing the idea of separated 'circles'. There is also a newness bonus for Google+. Its users have noticed that people are much more responsive there in comparison to the 'tired' Facebook. Having said that this is so far only the tech elite that has played around with Google+ so we should be careful to draw too drastic conclusions. We know that Google has not been very successful lately to develop and launch their own social media products. Remember the Buzz disaster? Having said that, it will be relatively easy to 'uncool' Facebook if users start to see that private conversations will remain separated from business contacts and engagements in the public sphere.

RSA: What are the major changes in the digital culture over the past years?

GL: For me that would be the growth of internet in countries like Brazil, India, China, Nigeria, Indonesia. I would really get worried if this growth would stagnate because that would all the sudden 'freeze dry' internet culture and start off a whole other dynamic. Connected to this continued growth outside of the traditional Western sphere is of course the uptake of mobile internet. We need to understand that this development also means an increased influence of the telecommunication giants who over the past two

decades didn't have much of a say over the network architecture and the type of services and applications that were developed. To summarize the state of the art: there is this odd mix of increased control of telcos, hardware manufacturers and Web 2.0 giants, combined with the rise of the so-called 'national webs' inside which the state can have better control over the users and content, and interesting new, disruptive innovations such as peer-to-peer banking via mobile phones, (almost) free telephony using Skype, weird global dating services and distributed forms of entertainment for the masses. You decide. It's as bleak as it is existing. That's why I am still involved, even after twenty years. The directions in which internet cultures develop is still undecided.

RSA: Is the Web able to change the world? Why can't the Web solve society´s problems?

GL: The internet is revolutionizing the way we communicate, but I doubt if it has much of a grip on society at large. What informal, networked communication does is that it slowly and invisibly erodes the current power structures and institutional politics. The internet is a large deconstruction machine. At first we don't see much of a change, except very visible resistance of those in power against free and open exchanges, more transparency and other business models that replaces the current intellectual property regimes. Maybe we shouldn't be surprised that the old structures are going in defense mode — and even gain territory. I believe that it is the interest of internet advocates, geeks, artists, designers and activists to openly criticize the Silicon Valley type of naive techno optimism as it based on a very particular techno-libertarian agenda that favors individualist solutions without much of an awareness of the social.

Web 2.0 lacks awareness of the commons and the importance of public infrastructures. We need to finally get rid of the venture capital agenda that the internet is about making a quick buck for the few that sell out and move on. Their model of innovation has caused so much damage. Against this model of the eternal cycle of start-ups that turn into monopolies I would put the image of a rich and culturally diverse ecology of initiatives that are either public, state-owned or market-oriented that are passionate about decentralized services focused on people's needs. The next generation of internet services will be modest in their claims, taking a few steps back while working behind the scenes on local issues. One of the new rounds of innovations will kick off with the shared awareness that internet, mobile

telephony etc. cannot solve society's problems and can only regain importance once it is realized that social problems are social in nature–and cannot be solved by social media. In a situation where the gap between rich and poor is growing rapidly it would be foolish to state that ICT will put an end to poverty. We need to redistribute wealth, reinvent politics, organize an ecological revolution because the policy models of the outgoing baby boom generation are simply too slow and have been compromised. It is a compulsive positivism that promotes quasi-holistic solutions and weak compromises under the banner of 'sustainability', in a time when we clearly need more conflict and dissent: people who dare to voice radical and unpopular positions. In this struggle you need to know first what you're fighting for, and with whom. The internet can help you in that. Once you have sorted it out, new media can be the perfect tool.

RSA: Can social networks help journalism?

Why should they, if I may ask? It time to uncouple media and the internet from journalism. It is not the core business or even destiny of social networks to produce news. Journalists are only a tiny minority on the Net, a group that is rapidly loosing their grip on the monopoly of news reporting. Instead of saying that there is a growing amount of so-called citizen journalists, amateurs that take over the position of professional journalists, as the dominant internet rhetoric often does, I would argue that the overwhelming amount of informal activities of average users that do not even pretend to produce 'news' in the first place. When I am chatting with my friends I do not even want to come close to the news industry. When I put a new picture of my cat on Flickr, this should not be considered news. The problem is that the Web 2.0 is indeed going in this direction. Everything runs under the banner of 'updating'. We need to get rid of this logic. Most of the communication online doesn't have to be covered by search engines and subjected to 'real time'. Instead we should talk about the increased 'recordability' of all situations. The real revolution here is not happening in the shrinking 'news' sector but in the phenomenal drop of data storage prices.

The future of journalism should be resolved by developing alternative revenue models and new ways to pre-finance investigative research. The current news organizations are most likely not going contribute to these solutions. It is not in their interest. Innovative models should really come from young people that decide not to join the old media conglomerates like

Globus etc. and start their own businesses. We need to understand that distribution is going to cost less and less. The question then becomes how we want to invest in high-quality content such as film making, literature, music, and investigative journalism. Too many people in the media circus are hooked on real-time channels like Twitter right now. That's nice for a while but distracting and hopefully will wear out sooner or later. It's addictive to accelerate but we're running away from the very real questions how we want to invest in sustainable content production.

RSA: Why are Brazilians so fanatical about social networks? A considerable part of the country is already on Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare and Orkut.

GL: The answer is not because they are stupid, narcissistic and ill-informed while numbed by US-American cyber-capitalism. From what I understand this obsessive use can be explained because of the passion for informal conversations and protected social engagements that is deeply rooted in Brazilian culture. Flirting and chatting can be sexy. Shall we call it libiduous noise? We should not forget how 'social media' came into being in the first place. The main reason of the rise of these 'walled gardens' is because of the decline of the public internet, which is increasing perceived as a dangerous place, dominated by hackers, pornographers and criminals that distribute virusses and spam. In other countries people would be more suspicious about what these corporations do with all these private data. While we can respect the need for informal exchanges we also need to understand that we have to go back to the core of the problem: the crisis in the public sphere. Just think of the troubles with public transportation, electricity and water, social housing, the future of public libraries, even roads. The struggle over the public internet in terms of ownership is only one of many similar fights that is going right now. To collectively hide inside safe corporate structures will not help us out on the long run. What we need to do is experiment with new forms of 'public culture'.

RSA: Please tell us about your latest book "Networks Without a Cause".

Polity Press is the publisher and it is planned to come out early 2012. I submitted the final manuscript late April. From the structure it looks very much like the previous parts of my studies in critical internet culture. The last one came out in 2007 and was called Zero Comments. In this fourth volume I still focus on blogs but also look at Web 2.0 critique and the turn to 'social media'. For instance I look at the ambivalent position these days towards anonymity. I develop of theory of 'comment cultures', an aspect of

today's internet culture that is not often looked at. I am not a one-idea author. I write essays and occasionally do case studies. My main focus remains the development of critical concepts. Right now that would be 'organized networks', a strong idea and image that opposes the further exploitations of 'weak ties' (as done by Google, Facebook and others). This concept calls for a halt to senseless hyper-growth, having to connect to the friends of the friends of the friends of your friends. Instead it looks how we can strengthen social relationships, both old and new ones.