Interview with Geert Lovink for the European InfoNet Adult Education

By Markus Palmén

Markus Palmén: Thinking about Web 2.0 and social media, what kind of learning space do you consider it to be, especially for adults?

Geert Lovink: I hope I do not disappoint if I say that social media (mainly Facebook and Twitter) have got nothing to do with education and learning. Social media provide people with 'news' and updates from their own social circles. They are huge distraction machines that create shareholder value through a very narrow corporate lens, dominated by US-American cultural values. At best they are entertainment platforms. Blogs can be used in the classroom but not social media. We can discuss Wikipedia as a collaborative online encyclopedia... That's all useful to discuss, as it would be to deconstruct the Google search engine as a hegemonic tool.

At our Institute of Network Cultures we are discussing the status of social media in the Unlike Us network. It is a project and discussion context in which researchers, artists, activists, programmers and designers participate who all look for alternative services (http://networkcultures.org/unlikeus/2013/03/26/bernard-stiegler-from-neuro power-to-noopolitics/) Here you can, for example, read what the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler thinks about social media as a machine of distraction. Higher education politics is high on his agenda, just look at his latest book that came out in English called *States of Shock*. Then there is *The Shallows*, the classic by Nicolas Carr and Peter Sloterdijk's call to train your will, comparable to sport and fitness. For those who are not so familiar with this critique there is Andrew Keen who sums up all the general arguments against the current architecture of social media in his *The Internet is not the Answer*. As far as I know there is not a well known work about social media and education. What we should do is disassociate social media from the internet and stimulate the use of dedicated research tools. The internet has so many different layers and ways to use! Corporate social media monopolies deliberately limit internet use to a few, very dumb aspects (such as 'friends', 'likes', 'trending' etc.). For me, learning is deep learning, and that's opposite to the real-time social pressures of updating. My advice would be to focus on the slow tools of knowledge production such as databases, archives, wikis and search engines. We need to un-hype social media, derail public conversations about them and focus on the incredible

diversity of (collaborative) online tools that are already out there.

MP: German researcher Manfred Spitzer has argued that young people are losing cognitive abilities as a result of use of digital media – "digital dementia". What do you make of this argument?

GL: I am not a fan of the moral panic that Spitzer and others spread. I want to debate the future architectures of networks, and not be over-determined by the medical profession claiming declining brain capacity because of our social media addiction. A much more sovereign attitude is desirable. I prefer the concept of 'neuroplasticity'. Usually this is not looked at in the direction of recovery. We can also read this idea in the reverse way. Yes, there is hope after the mass addiction for humankind. We can forget social media. People of planet earth, do not despair, our brains will bounce back! We will overcome this organized stupidity.

MP: Social media and the web are unavoidable and ubiquitous in people's lives, and children are said to be born into this environment as "digital natives". Are there real alternatives to living in a digital world?

GL: In opposition of the current trend we should disassociate social media from 'the web'. Inside the walled gardens of social media there is only real-time chatter (which is not even properly archived). You are right when you say that social media is important in people's lives. After all, we're social animals. The mood in the herd matters. Our peers and friends are vital, and so are family members, the people we work and play sports with. What we're talking about here is education, learning, and how to organize that in the digital age. Which role are digital tools playing in the current setup? To limit that to social media is really annoying as these are noise generators, news pointers, dating sites, infotainment. That's nice but makes me wonder why we are distracted. Why don't we discuss ways of online learning, the politics of MOOCs, the current poverty of the online learning dashboards, the use of online video in the class rooms, the integration of videos in the next generation text books. We're not talking about 'alternatives to living in a digital world'. No one is advocating offline romanticism.

MP: Who has the power in Web 2.0?

GL: I am sorry to say that Web 2.0 no longer exists. The term came up in the aftermath of the dotcom crash when Silicon Valley had to forget the huge drama of the dotcom crash with its immense capital destruction and mass

unemployment. The 'blogosphere', Second Life and early social networks such as Friendster, Hyves, Bibo, MySpace etc. were soon overrun by Google and Facebook. These days we speak of 'the stacks'. This concept was introduced by Bruce Sterling in 2012. It adds up IT giants Amazon, Microsoft, Apple, Google and Facebook. It is indeed a conglomerate, known to make secret deals in Bay Area cafes where they set prices, discuss salary caps and take-overs. What unite these corporations is not just their wish to create monopolies (and eliminate markets) but also their inherent tendency to become invisible. Their aim is to colonize and administrate the techno unconscious. They do not want to be accountable. Let's forget Google, that's what they want. This is a very different strategy from all that's being taught in PR and marketing classes. The general public should not openly talk about the stacks (that' why [Pando] is doing such a great job). Their aim is to disappear in the background as quasi-public infrastructure. Venture capitalist Peter Thiel is their intellectual guru. He is the one who openly defends their status as monopolies and states that we should stop complaining. Leave our Valley alone!

MP: Web 2.0 promises to bring learning for all in the form of MOOCs, eLearning and other free learning resources. What advantages and problems do you see with these learning resources?

GL: The hype around MOOCs has almost faded away. What I am interested in is the New Normal that will rule in a couple of years from now. Recordings of lectures and courses have existed for decades. E-learning is as old as the computer itself and has an impressive history. We should stop insulating the latest e-learning platforms from general debates about the future of (higher) education in the age of austerity and mass debt. We all know that life-long learning will further increase. All these services will grow substantially because literary billions more are seeking access to education. I bet the computer and smart phones will have a much bigger impact in 'developing' parts of the world where large populations are seeking access to education. I suppose am not saying anything new here. Kahn Academy will not replace Harvard. What we are interested in is investigating the aesthetics of this type of online video, and how, eventually, online video will be integrated into e-books. How will offline and online educational material relate to each other? In general it will be very wise to develop material that takes offline as default and see the online component as the interactive one in which email, chat and, yes, social media can have a role to foster debate. Here in Amsterdam we just put in an application to do research together

with public libraries about their role in 'social reading'. To discuss online text together has a great future—provided we design it well and do not hand it over to the stacks (in this case Amazon or Google).

MP: What kind of media literacy skills/critical skills are needed in the future to interact with information on the web?

GL: We can only hope that technical literacy will become a core course in the curriculum. Programming skills should already be taught in primary schools. I always thought that at some point math education in high schools would be 'enriched' with a heavy computer component but not much has happened since I had to suffer to get through the math *rite de passage*, 40 years ago. I am not saying math should be responsible for computer training. But who is? There is a gap in the Western educational model that somehow no one is responsible for the necessary programming skills. It is always the 'other' disciplines that have to provide students with the primary training. In the meanwhile it is particularly Silicon Valley that profits from the new computer illiteracy. Why hasn't IT become a core competence such as your native language and math? The so-called 'sciences' also backs off. Why are physics and chemistry that much important? The answer (the tool fetish of our current devices) is maybe not all that interesting; we need to do something about it. In the last two decades I have witnessed myself how weird we have responded to the rise of 'new media'. After much hype most of the sensibility and core competence in society is again fading away. New media course have closed down and most cultural initiatives and festival have disappeared (at least least in the Netherlands). Computers and smart phones withdraw in the background. The democratization of computing has not lead to a deeper understanding, quite the opposite. It is ironic that in Western society people knew more about computers and programming 15-20 years ago. Web 2.0 has greatly contributed to this loss of literacy. Frank Pasquale calls it the 'black box society' we're living in. We are ruled by algorithms but have no say about them.

MP: How would you describe yourself as a learner on the web?

GL: Over the decades I have gotten used to the fact that I have to learn so many new things from young people. If you can't deal with the fact that wonderful people in their 20s and 30s have tons of insights, you're working in the wrong business. It doesn't mean you have to adapt to everything they like but at least one has to maintain a basic curiosity how all these things operate, and what the cultural logic of the moment entails. You have to shut

up and listen, be patient and observe carefully, and then judge for yourself what you want to get out of their stories—and attack them mercilessly, as in the case of the cynical logic of Facebook or Uber. Where are the wise old people that can guide us in this computerized society? Hallo, baby boomers! You hippies really let us down. Either you are clueless or guilty for today's mess. Why can't we learn a single thing from you when it comes to computers? We understand you're not digital natives but why pretend to be outsiders? You are not. Now that you retire, you will have to take full responsibility for this world. Your parents are long dead, you can't blame them anymore.

ML: You are among the pioneers and developers of the concept of tactical media. Thinking about the world today with urgent problems such as climate change, refugee crisis and marginalization of the millennial generation – what kind of tactical media actions would you like to see in response to current world problems?

GL: I'd wish to see a move away from the centralized, manipulative and limiting possibilities of Facebook and Twitter, moving towards 'federated' collaborative tools that do not address us as 'friends' who are forced to 'like' the shocking image of the young Kobani boy who is washed ashore to show our rage about the current migration policies and to show our solidarity with refugees. There are so many ways to engage in self-organization. Retweeting the news is a nonsense gesture. Being tactical these days is about setting up groups, contacting locals, and getting involved in unpopular struggles. Responding to the agenda of the world news manufacturers is not something for activists. We need to look ahead and define tomorrow's agenda. I understand that this will not give us much satisfaction as it is pretty unpopular to put yourself in an avant-garde position. Being avant-garde is considered something for losers.

MP: Assuming that people's media literacy is growing all the time, do tactical media actions still have the potential to shock and make us think or does tactical media need to develop/update itself?

GL: Tactical media is a historical term from the early-mid nineties that tried to capture that opening possibilities at the time, from camcorders, fax, public access television, free radio to email and the early web. This was combined with a decline of the traditional left and a rise of NGOs and a growing involvement in media activism of artists and designers. Hackers were also part of the gang. The diversity sketched here no longer exists. We

do not feel we're part of a 'smart phone spring'. Digital technologies and the internet are now the default. There is hardly anything outside of it. Young artists these days are fascinated by old analogue technologies but usually they are without any audience. They are truly 'sovereign', in the Adilkno definition of being on their own, broadcasting to themselves, very much unlike the selfie you post on Facebook that receives 428 likes in a few minutes. Tactical media these days resist the logic of instant self-gratification. The question what tactical use of our digital tools is today is a really interesting one. In my understanding we need to look for direct connections, beyond the broadcasting and networking metaphors. The answer is, most likely, not to be found in our visual culture, which is already so rich and abundant. In the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe we see that the most impact is made by those groups and individuals that manage to create direct solidarity links with the refugees and migrants. The peer-to-peer philosophy has a lot to offer to us in this respect. Our future lies in offline digital networks. As we all know, the internet is broken and we will not be able to fix it any time soon if the circumstances do not radically change. With the stacks in charge, it is inevitable that the collective imagination will leave the internet context and migrate elsewhere. The education sector needs to be aware of this tendency. Sooner than later, the digital will become boring, if not repressive. This will inevitably put the 'distraction' controversy in another light.