Interview with Geert Lovink by Francesca De Benedetti for La Repubblica

FDB: Since "Networks Without a Cause" was published, in early 2012, have new spaces of dissent been created? Or do we get stuck in social networks that are more oriented towards conformism and "narcosis"?

GL: Here, at the Institute of Network Cultures in Amsterdam, our small research centre in a pragmatic Dutch polytech school, we're like the clown that tries to keep five balls in the air at the same time. We really suffered from the budget cuts in culture. In the fields in which we're active we do not see sudden moves. There is rarely acceleration, to be honest, despite the fact the internet has now saturated and is fully mainstream. Of course we all dream from the one project we start that reaches a critical mass and grows overnight like a wild meme. In our field of critical internet study that simply hasn't happened yet. In part, this is also related to the fact that we start early with a topic. It turned out nice yet useless to know that you're five years ahead of the game. After 'alternatives in social media', the Unlike Us project, we launched MoneyLab, which looks at internet revenue models such as bitcoin and crowdfunding. There is a growing interest in this. The question how artists and creative workers are going to make a living in the near future occupies us all. Video Vortex, the network about the politics and aesthetics of online video still exists. Tons of stuff is happening in that field, just think of YouTube channels, video on Facebook and Netflix. This summer I wrapped up my next book in which I summarize our experiences over the past years. It is my fifth volume in my ongoing investigations on critical internet culture entitled *Social Media Abyss (*published in Italian by Agea). All in all, I hope I didn't get stuck. Internet is not yet the new normal. Maybe in few years, when the progressive and subversive energy will have disappeared and moved elsewhere I will focus on something else.

FDB: Could you update us about the Unlike Us project—the outcome of your analysis of the dominant social media platforms, and the research about the alternatives?

GL: After Snowden the quest to build alternatives became much more complex. Not only had the alternatives be ad-free and decentralized, focused on collaboration instead of 'updating', from mid 2013 they also had to offer encryption on all layers. Security concerns existed before Snowden but not to this extend. As you might know Facebook is now offering precisely this… It shows that Facebook can be pressured to change its policies. However, it would be much better to make encrypted communication the default. Right

now it is merely a consumer option. Unlike Us, in the meanwhile continues as an active email list where all these developments are being discussed. The latest event we had in this context was the Facebook Farewell Party, which took place in the Amsterdam city theatre at Leidseplein in Amsterdam, on June 23, 2015. The evening, which was attended by 350 people, was an attempt to mainstream the Unlike Us agenda. The event got some media coverage but the overall feelings about it afterwards were mixed. It is still early days and the Facebook dependency in society remains massive. In economically volatile times like this people do not like to get rid of their social networks they built up over years. Alternatives are still in their infantile stages, so all in all we can't say that we made that much progress over the past five years, except that there are many more commercial players entering the field.

FDB: To pay Facebook – to be paid by Facebook. These are two proposals, the first one comes from Zeynep Tufekci, the second from Jaron Lanier. The core idea of both of them is the same: Facebook takes value from our data, so we should become the "owners" of the platform to get our privacy back – or else the profit should be redistributed. What do you think about these options? Is it possible – is it useful to change the Facebook business model?

GL: As we've seen in the case of Snowden, it is possible to put pressure on Facebook. However, in the case of their brutal business models, I doubt it is that's going to be easy but why not try and design a global campaign? I just celebrated my five years off Facebook so I am not concerned. Our institute also left Facebook, during the Farewell Party, which was controversial, even inside our small institute, as we lost an influential marketing tool for one's events and publications. The other main partners in the event, Waag Society and the Stadsschouwburg, of course, did not leave Facebook themselves, so we can feel pretty stupid about our own 'politically correct' gesture. Has la Repubblica already left Facebook? Will you stop working for them because they are still on Facebook? Now we're talking. Is still all rhetoric, a private matter, a 'consumer choice'? I do not like to go there. It is good to politicize the issue. This is why we decided the bring out the English translation of the work of the Italian collective Ippolita called 'The Facebook Aquarium'. It came out during the Farewell Party. Your country can be proud to have the most sophisticated Facebook critics in the world. Read their work! The reformist proposals of Tufekci and Lanier are mainstream American and do not cut very deep, precisely because they do not deal with the ugly side of Facebook as a ruthless marketing machine. Having said that, I like their

approach because at least it is monetizing the internet and questions the silent Silicon Valley consensus about the Free. I'd love to have a subscription-based model for online services but I don't see this happening with Facebook in the way it is run right now. I'd rather like to go for the MySpace model of mass migration elsewhere, overnight: forget Facebook. That's my dream. Facebook is beyond repair for me. It cannot be forced to go back to an initial stage of the innocent address book in which the user creates social networks according to his or her interests. Look what's going on. Facebook enters the YouTube market, it wants to take over the news industry and eventually e-commerce.

FDB: Transparency, control, "digital narcosis": you underlined these elements in 2012. Now they seem to have become even more evident: stifling monopolies, Datagate and surveillance issues. What's your opinion on this? Do you think it's still possible to be neither cyber-utopian nor pessimistic? Is it still possible to "question the rules"? Corporations, but institutions too, seem to control the net and the infrastructures even more. Is decentralized and distributed net still possible to realize? Is it still possible to "take social network architecture in our hands"?

GL: You're asking big questions here. I have been in this game for 25 years and not known to give up easily. We are many: geeks, artists, researchers, investigative journalists, whistleblowers, teachers, designers. However, we do not often come together so it is hard to see what we have in common. We're working on so many different levels at the same time. This goes far beyond our daily mood swings, from utopian to pessimism, and back. There is the European Question. Do we have a political program and how do we deal with the political realm of regulation? We often like to walk away from it, while at the same time demanding (to whom?) that something needs to be done to stop the erosion of independent internet. Think of the post-Snowden slogan: 'We Need to Fix the Internet'. But who is the 'we' and to whom is this demand addressed? This issue goes back to the bankruptcy of the internet governance models that have functioned over the past 25 years. If we leave it to the engineering class, this is what we get. Internet Society, IETF and ICANN have, in the end, facilitated the censorship, filtering, monopolistic companies, the centralized infrastructures and services and related surveillance practices from ad agencies to NSA. It would be too kind to say that the liberal struggle for an open internet failed. Some other form of regulation will need to happen. The engineers cannot walk away from the job and say: we had nothing to do with it. No one from their camp tried to

stop Facebook. The blind belief in 'net neutrality' fooled the engineering class. Without going as far as setting up an international criminal tribunal, these questions need to be addressed, and first of all researched, in an independent manner. If we want to build alternatives, we need to address these issues. We can't do it anymore the old way. But we also need to understand that regulation without ideas is also not a viable solution either. We can blame Brussels etc., but that becomes an empty gesture if we stand there with empty hands, having to answer the question what other internet is possible. This is my political strategy: without alternative concepts and blueprints we cannot regulate the internet industry. We need to work through the digital, there is no safe outsiders position in this case. But this can only be done if we see our work as a political project, in dialogue with the political realm. As Carlo said on the Unlike Us list: "We no longer wait for the tech people to come up with something as that may be like waiting for Godot." (see: http://www.youbroketheinternet.org/#legislation).

FDB: Let's consider the recent developments of social networks within the wider context of neoliberalism. You've underlined how they together produced "digital narcosis", "unbridled optimism", "competitive neo-liberal pressures". On the one hand, it seems that Facebook &co are even more powerful imposing their paradigm, their power structure. On the other hand, we witnessed "the strange non-death of neo-liberalism". Is this a paradox? Was the neo-liberal crisis after 2008 an opportunity to change paradigms? Did we miss it? Again, is it still possible to "question the rules"?

GL: The incredible six months in which Yannis Varouflakis was in charge are an important Brechtian Lehrstück in this respect. I happened to know Yannis through our common connection with Australia, both having worked there, with personal ties, having common friends. I met him in 2009 and have followed his work closely since then. He is so inspiring because he took his intellectual baggage with him, without alienating audiences with complex or dull academic language. This is what we need in the internet context as well: speak to power while remaining our roots in the communities where we come from. Of course we could counter that Yannis lost, he was stunned by the wall of silence. We need to learn from this because Vint Cerf and the other platinum members of the Californian tech elite are using precisely the same tactic when confronted with massive criticism over the cynical policies: they remain silent and walk away. Such a politics of absence is not in our repertoire. We still believe in representation and visible identities. Making things visible is our tactics. We can neither read silence nor deal with it very

well, let alone utilize ourselves. The rich are withdrawing, and this is how they maintain their presence, a paradox which is not being dealt with so far. The confrontation with Uber, and to some extend also Airbnb, is an interesting test case. Their organized arrogance is incredible, with their dotcom valuation style as if it is 1999. However, the resistance against their business models is getting stronger and gains visibility. The same should be done with Google and Facebook: radical attack. Ippolita is showing us the way, as do countless artists and hacktivists, including Julian Assange and Anonymous (thanks for the lulz).

FDB: Looking at Arab Spring, the Occupy movements and other experiences with dissent that expressed themselves through the net, it seems that social change is easy to organize yet difficult to deepen and strengthen. These protests do not really affect the system.

GL: True. This brings into question the organizational models that we've been using so far, including the silly consensus rituals of the general assembly. Movements of today need more coalition building and internal debates, not more consensus. The real danger here is fashion and life style. Movements should be open for a variety of identities and backgrounds. The key point here is how to capture the long-term commitment of those involved. From now on we want movements with consequences, not those that disappear after a weekend of protests. Having said that, we cannot return to the 20th century of Leninist policies. A century ago the emotional energies of masses were absorbed, and structured, in the form of political parties that had clear hierarchies that produced the marching orders. Family, school, factory, sports and the church were in tune with the party and the trade union. These days the social is blurred, diffuse, fragmented. Unless we don't take this into account, not much will happen. We cannot be nostalgic about the 'avant-garde' role of the Party and attached unified visual arts style, and hope for the guidance role of some overdetermining factor (war?) that will bring society together again. We need contemporary forms that reflect the current forms of 'individuation', and that's how we end with the social media because they seem to do precisely this. This is the work that I am doing with my Sydney theory friend Ned Rossiter. We have proposed to further investigate the idea of the 'organized network' as an alternative to both the dominant social media platforms and the form of the traditional political party. Stop updating, start working together. No more inflation of weak ties, build networks of strong ties. The fact that movements come and go, fail and remain on the margins can only be a source of

inspiration and should not turn us down. I know that Italians can really suffer from their mood swings: you're out of your minds when the movement is out on the streets, and are severely depressed when it is all over. BTW, both moods are in fact an inspiration for the world. We need to push further here and experiment with new forms of social that are technologically informed. Italy is the ideal laboratory for this, much better than, for instance, California. So please, do not get stuck into your depressions, investigate what happened and report it to the world. Italians seem to be obsessed with the Social Media Question. That's a very good thing, and use this to your advantage. For most people in the world it is merely a tool, they don't spend much time thinking about it.

FDB: Considering Europe and anti-austerity movements in particular, does their use of the networks affect the system? I refer to the experience of the "Indignados" (Podemos has somehow emerged out of this experience) but also to the capability of expressing dissent against austerity issues. If you consider as an example the Greece affair, after the agreement of 12th July the hash tag "ThisIsACoup" rapidly spread, becoming a global trending topic on Twitter. At first glance, this seems great. But was this kind of protest effective?

GL: Facebook, Twitter and Google do not operate outside of society, right? The fact that the crisis in Greece is a number one news item should not surprise us. The anti-austerity movements and their parties are now leading the debates. But this can easily mislead us to think that we're in charge. This is not at all the case. Headlines mean nothing, and presence on social media even less so. The problem here is the withdrawal of power, outside of the democratic arena. It is what some might call 'post democracy'. Most of the officials Greece is dealing with in this 'debt' crisis are not elected. This also means that they care less about 'public opinion'. The target of activists should no longer be this simulacrum called 'public sphere'. It is fake and only distracts us from getting a better understanding of who's in charge, and how to bring them down. Just think of the banks and their global infrastructure that moves around immense amounts of money (beyond our understanding) in milliseconds.

FDB: You always underlined the importance of "tactical media", temporary actions, decentralized networks. Do you think this kind of paradigm can still affect the system? Don't fragmentation and temporariness play into that hand of neoliberalism?

GL: You might be right and I am open for suggestions to start organizing in entirely different ways. But don't come up with Leninist approaches that have had such dramatic consequences in the past. Why should I be open to the suggestion that all our new media experiments so far have been neo-liberal in nature, while the Leninists are getting away with the historical fact that it was the communist party (as a social form) that was responsible for the Gulags and the deaths of the tens of millions of people, including the hijacking of millions for decades behind the Iron Curtain? This drama happened because of their centralist way of organization. I can very well historicize 'tactical media' as a Western late 20th century artistic experiment in the age of multi-media. Piece of cake, and this will be done over the next few years, even if our generation is not very good and glorifying and documenting its own recent past. The questions of today are on the table, and they are urgent. Think of global warming in the light of the upcoming mobilizations for Paris, late 2015. The issue is no longer how to kick-start the movement: the momentum is already there. The question is really if we can come together to take time to discuss the Social Organization Question, and do that in such that way that it brings together the technical, political and cultural levels. These days, the social is technical in nature. That should be our common starting point.

FDB: I would like to have your considerations about Zuckerberg wanting to expand in Africa. Together with Bono he wrote an op ed in the NYT about this: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/opinion/sunday/to-unite-the-earth-connect-it.html?_r=0.

GL: The analysis of internet.org has been made by many already and is straight forward. In May 2015 60 cyber rights organisations signed a petitions against Facebook's plans (https://www.accessnow.org/pages/open-letter-mark-zuckerberg-regarding-internetorg). The good intentions of the evangelists Bono and Zuckerberg are not all that different from the ones that were expressed 10-15 years ago within the framework of the UN's World Sumiit on Information Society. However, back then Facebook did not exist yet. And now we know a lot more about the hidden corporate strategies of Silicon Valley, also thanks to Edward Snowden. What's NSA's involvement in internet.org? The access for Africa program by Facebook will provide millions with a' fake internet' that can only be accessed through a Facebook login. This reinstates the fear of Facebook critics that this social media monopolist is ultimately more

interested in the ID business than the selfies and likes on your personal profile page. Through the identication 'gate' companies can control a whole lot more. It's the perfect 'relaxed' mind control. Total but invisible. The profile business is short-term. Maybe the like economy as well as this depends a lot on the sales of data profiles to advertisers and intelligence services. Gate control is so much more powerful because it oversees all internet activities—not just those on the Facebook site. This is why the fight for fake IDs is such a vital one because that would, potentially, pollute Facebook's database and make it useless.