Interview with Geert Lovink on the Filter Bubble in Social Media

By Sena Partal (graduate/research student at Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design)

Sena Partal: Lars Backstrom, engineering director at Facebook, said in a statement "Our top priority is keeping you connected to the people, places and things you want to be connected to — starting with the people you are friends with on Facebook. That's why today, we're announcing an upcoming change to News Feed ranking to help make sure you don't miss stories from your friends." What do you think about the social media companies that are applying filters and recommendations to people's information? What are the established interests behind it?

Geert Lovink: The mechanisms at work here have been known for years. The turning point is arbitrary but I would put it somewhere after 2008, when the founding frenzy of Web 2.0 had come to an end and the scaled-up platforms were getting serious about making money, in short, when the internet entered its monopoly stage. It wasn't anymore about sheer possibilities.

The focus shifted to locking in customers. These techniques are now called 'persuasive design'. It's all about finding out how to unconsciously please the user by tracing online behaviour and identifying the essential elements that trigger further clicking and swiping. Why wouldn't I want to miss stories from my friends? According to the journalist logic there is no reason for this. They would say, the reader doesn't want miss the latest world events or the local news stories. At what point did 'the social' started to override the traditional media understanding? McLuhan predicted this with his emphasis on the 'global village'—but the closure of the social media mind is much worse. The traditional tribe at least did not consist of friends-only. This is not even the case in the underground pop-culture understanding of tribes. Or cyber-tribes, for that matter. These are identity-focussed groups. Friends is a much more vague category. It takes a lot of consideration, and pain, for me to decide that are you not my friends, that I don't want to have anything to do with you.

At this point we can only guess about corporate research (and its recent history). There is no concise history of social media yet. A lot of crucial insider information is still missing. We, internet theorists and critics are confined to our Plato caves. We only see moving shadows. Let's be cautious. While looking into usability, user experience, behaviourism and other

marketing techniques, we should not overlook the user. Why are we attracted to 'friends' and their recommendations in the first place? Are we addicted to positive affirmation? How the heck did we fall in love with filters without even noticing them?

SP: Do you think social media users in general are interested in having control over their news feed?

GL: I doubt. Once a tool or service is new, we like to find out their affordances and play around with settings, we discuss them with peers. Facebook and many other social media services have become so powerful precisely because they became part our daily lives, they are now deeply routed into our routines. At first, me, and many others, were confident that the suborn and independent internet generation would get bored soon, and would, almost intuitively, started looking for the Next Thing (as happened in the past with MySpace, Blogger etc.). This didn't happen. Most users I speak start to get uncomfortable when I raise the issue why they are still on Facebook. They got lured into it and do not know how this happened, and how to quit. There is no reason to quit. Slavoj Zizek is right with his bad conscious (we know it is bad for us but still use it etc.). Yet, he doesn't offer an alternative either, and this is where the social media story gets stuck. Spreading critical information how news feeds work is good and feeds the uncomfortable feeling—but doesn't change much. It merely raises the paradoxes we have to live under.

SP: Would users actually be happy to see counter opinions in social media platforms?

GL: Don't worry. They won't show up. This would require a complete reworking of the social media architecture and the internet as such towards a social toolbox. It is not a matter of changing an algorithm. Facebook and Twitter have destroyed the ability to create communities and work together. The overall structure would need to be replaced with forum-type tools that have to become much more open. Responses would have to become much more prominent, less marginal, like the comments of today underneath newspaper articles or YouTube videos.

SP: Social media users know that there is a problematic area in their habits (related to distraction and addiction) around their social media use. Do you think companies or users have a responsibility to change this?

GL: Right now, there is no responsibility at all. I would not call upon Google and Facebook to become more 'accountable'. I do not believe in corporate ethics. For me, these corporations are beyond repair and need to be split up, socialized and turned into public utilities. In the future we need to dismantle emerging intermediates straight away and not wait. That's the big mistake my generation made. We were so arrogant to think that monopolies on the internet would crumble and die, or at least be pushed into the background, as had happened with the telecoms, IBM and to a certain extend also Microsoft. Infrastructure itself should be made part of the 'net neutrality' debate.

SP: Do you think people would do something more meaningful while they are bored or simply in their spare times, if social media never existed?

GL: Concerned neuro-scientists and psychologists emphasize the importance of boredom: it's time in which our brain is processing the experiences of the day and give them a certain place. OK, that's good to know, but slightly moralistic. They need to work more on that story and repackage it. That's my opinion. I do not say that reading a paper newspaper is so much better than the 'soul sucking' that happens when people stare at their smart phones. The issue is really the 'quality time' of coming together, and why so many of us no longer experience that epiphany of the social as something intensely exciting.

SP: At the last F8 Talk Mark Zuckerberg mentioned that their future goal is to "Give everyone the power to share anything with anyone". What do you think about premises of open participation environment of the social media?

GL: I never bought the 'sharing' ideas. For Zuckerberg sharing means stealing other people's content without having to pay for it. Sharing means he gets all the advertisement money, not the content producers. That's the cynical reality of the 'economy of the free'. We give our content and data away for free, in return for a free service. But there is another aspect. I am interested in that word 'anyone'. The friends logic right inhabits us to come in contact with 'anyone'. Against the current waves of nationalism in Europe, it would, for instance, be interesting to have many more options to 'go random', like in the case of Chatroulette.

SP: Are there ways to promote criticism, discussion and reflection using existing social media platforms?

GL: Not in their current form. As long as we live under the regime of 'friends' you can imagine that it will remain impossible to have a serious debate, discussing issues with antagonists. This is a point the Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe has made for a long time. A debate without antagonists destroys the public sphere (if it ever existed in the first place). Sharing without antagonists is the essence of the filter bubble technology: it makes sure that we will never encounter our 'enemies'. The fact that it still happens on Twitter is in itself remarkable and the 'shit storm' (as it is called in the German-speaking social media sphere) is a fact, with public attention focusing on trolls, revenge porn and other forms of marginal deviant behaviour, so easily amplified by the dominant 'meme' logic of today's news industry. The viral spreading of information has itself become the decease. It is the viral logic itself that needs to be dismantled.

SP: In your e-flux essay on the social media ideology you mention that the ideology behind social media architecture leaves zero space for users to reprogram their communication spaces. How do you think it is possible to give users more space to reprogram their own communication spaces? Do we need rebuild these platforms?

GL: No, we need to leave them, and then they crumble, and disappear within months. The internet itself is the one and only platform. I am a strong believer in the power of public protocols and infrastructure that is not owned or controlled by anyone. Yes, the way out of this situation is, first of all, mass awareness, and then, mass technical literary, starting with youngsters, which is the task of education. The computer as it is still known, is this amazingly open, programmable environment. Let's regain our power and take over it over (or back, if you like) while it is still possible. It's not too late.