

Research questions for Geert Lovink for the Master Thesis “Impacts of the Constant Digitalization on Society” by Christina Capellari (University of Applied Sciences FH Joanneum, Graz/Austria).

Christina Capellari: Do you consider social networks to be social or anti-social?

Geert Lovink: The starting point there would be my 2012 essay *What's the Social in Social Media?* which was published by E-flux Journal (<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/40/60272/what-is-the-social-in-social-media/>) . In 2015 I updated the piece for my book *Social Media Abyss*. Recently I came across the enigmatic *Anti-Social Social Club* brand (<https://shop.antisocialsocialclub.com/>), which calls itself “the leading online destination for men’s contemporary fashion and street wear.” It’s not hard to guess why they call themselves ‘anti-social’: they dissent and act against the norm: ‘The duty of youth is to revolt’. As we know, these days revolution is a lifestyle, a commodity one purchases. With ‘the social’ it is not all that different. In Italian, people say: “Are you on social?” which means: “Are you on Facebook?” You ask about the nature of social networks. I like that. Social networks are specific yet broad and inclusive while closed. And most of all, they are non-technical. However, these days people no longer use that term and speak about ‘social media’. The shift from networks to media is an interesting one. It indicates that a ‘broadcasting’ element has sneaked in. On Facebook we broadcast to our friends and the community at large. And to Facebook itself, the NSA, and the companies that target their advertisements there.

The critique of social media that has been developed roughly since 2011 insists that the user as neo-liberal subject is using the platform for self-promotion purposes. No one can escape this element of ‘the social’. However, this cannot be done without empathy. That’s why so many scholars emphasize the ‘affect’ element in the daily communication on social media. That’s why I would not call these platforms ‘anti-social’. It’s a punk gesture to go anti-social. That’s the provocation of fashion. But who can afford to say ‘fuck you’ against their tribes, family and ‘friends’? The fact of the matter is, young people are, again, becoming more dependent on their immediate social surroundings. The idea of an independent life, of autonomy and freedom, is slipping away. Only after we have broken away from our traditional ties we can pretend to be sovereign and ‘design’ our lives from zero.

CC: What do you think of the constant self-portrayal mania on social media, particularly of young people?

GL: The debate on the narcissistic nature of selfies is currently picking up (see for instance Kristin Dombek's *The Selfishness of Others*). I agree with her that it is of no use to condemn others. Taking selfies is not disease. People on social media are not sick. We need to research and then politicize the habits and unconscious manipulations. Yes, dopamine might play a role in all this. We need that constant reassurance of our very existence: I want to be liked. But what's Mark Zuckerberg got to do with that? The problem here is not some pathological behavior but the secretive way in which these innocent pictures are instrumentalized by social media monopolies, advertisers and other third parties that buy and sell 'big data'. Take <http://www.cognitec.com/>. If you want to know more about this, check out the work of the artist Trevor Paglen. His talk that I saw at Re:publica 17 in Berlin was called *Your Pictures are Looking at You* (<https://re-publica.com/de/17/session/your-pictures-are-looking-you>).

CC: In which ways has communication via social media and smart phones changed our social behavior?

GL: This change is still well under way so it is hard to look back or make predictions. Smart phones with internet have been around only for a decade. I would emphasize the importance of real-time communication or 24/7 as it is often called. This means that our social life is not supposed to have delays and distances anymore. Because they both still exist we get frustrated, and depressed. People should be next to us—but they aren't. As many observed, it becomes harder and harder to be bored. There's always the next update. My expectation is that things will inevitably normalize and the smart phone itself will become boring. As is the case with all technologies, this one also will be drawn into the background and morph, from being a sexy gadget into invisible infrastructure.

CC: Which current developments (instant messages, social media etc.) remain important in the near future?

GL: Text is clean and simple, whereas (moving) images are complex, fat and dirty. These two poles were already dealt with by Umberto Eco in his famous distinction between the two operating systems: the simple and sober Protestant Windows Personal Computer of Microsoft versus the opulent, shiny, baroque nature of the Catholic Apple Mac. Both exist next to each

other. That's still the case: there is SMS, but there's also VR. I love the steam punk version of the future. Instead of heading into the direction of a deadly boring sterile future such as Eggers' *The Circle*, in which a merger between Facebook and Google takes over the world (with all its good intentions) and a Minority Report regime has taken over that reads our minds and prevents any bad thoughts and intentions, we struggle with the crudeness of yesterday's leftovers.

How do post-industrial ruins look like? In the early 1970s a friend of mine and I collected computer junk from a junk yard, situated on a desolate canal in Diemen, east of Amsterdam. These were probably integrated circuit boards from the IBM 360 mainframe generation, widely used in the 1960s. We took them apart to trade for electronic parts we used to build amplifiers. Cyberpunk literature is full of such motives. We need to add those post-spectacle elements into a narrative.

CC: How do you see the future of our 'digitalized' society?

GL: What's the future of electricity? Boring or exciting? The digital is nothing else but a way to store information in endless series of ones and zeros. Software and algorithms make it possible to read, process and manipulate data. There is endless ways of doing this. There will always be new ways to produce, store and read information. At some point we will lose our fascination for new technologies and the attention will shift towards the social application side, which platform capitalism has to neglect as they cannot make any money from it. If we build systems that are indifferent and opaque, it will become hard to extract surplus value out of that information. Some say capitalism's will to re-invent ways to make money is endless and will never dry up. Others point at the inevitable decline and exhaustion of the collective obsession to press value out of tiny differences. Look at Japan. There is already nearly 30 years of crisis and stagnation there. That's serious a whole new phenomena. This could easily happen to the rest of the world. There is nothing spectacular about a nullification of the state of mind. We'll become flat and numb. The nihilism of Zero Society is something that occupies me. Mark Fischer came close, and also Franco Berardi has got a lot to say about this new type of society. We carry on, from one dark media event to the next, and no longer care much about the precise details who owns all these data, what money we use, which cars drive us. We fade away into a subconscious state of mind, in a friction-free society, obsessed with comfort and smooth exchanges.