By Carolina Farina

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Carolina Farina: In your latest book *Social Media Abyss: Critical Internet Cultures and the Force of Negation* you write: "Tomorrow's challenge will not be the internet's omnipresence but its very invisibility." How can we best deal with this?

Geert Lovink: Slowly we are forgetting the newness of the internet. We no longer notice we're online anymore and only wake up with the next Twitter scandal of Trump. As Sherry Turkle explains to Bregje van der Haak in the Dutch TV documentary VPRO Backlight, there are less and less 'white spots', areas without internet coverage. So where do we go when we want to hide and be left alone? Switching off is becoming a lifestyle choice. People stay away from the internet as if it were a therapy. These days, going offline always has to be conscious decision and involves work. Network failures become rare (even in the middle of nowhere). A growing group of people want to get away from their overly busy lives and think that offline is a way to find a new balance. Either they are stressed or cannot bear the electronic signals, got depressed or had a burn-out. Self-help literature, media literacy education and the health care system will assist us to 'master' this attention monster—if you can afford it to be offline, which is not the case in most jobs. In many cases, availability is itself part of the job.

In the West we are no longer debating electricity, water or gas; we simply presume it's there (which is not the case in most parts of the world). If there is no electricity we put up solar panels, big or small ones. It's like that with internet connectivity. Of course there are regions with low speed internet connectivity. And there are countries, like the United States and Australia, that refuse to invest in public infrastructure and firmly believe that fiber optics as a universal service will be provided out of the blue, by "the markets". In these cases we get strange anomalies of ideology, resulting in resentment and decay. The growth of bandwidth worldwide is showing unexpected patterns with strange winners and losers.

CF: You mention platform capitalism, and how the shift from network ideology to platform culture has changed both social networks and the concept of community. How does this work out in our analog and digital

lives?

GL: Computation and storage are still getting cheaper, every year. Combine that with growing bandwidth and you get the picture. Once the network effect of a start-up kicks in, it is so easy to scale up and create a monopoly that can be maintained because of social dependency. This is the model investors prefer: to destroy markets and centralize power into the hands of a few monopolies that can maximize profits as they no longer have competitors. The focus is no longer on venture capital and hypergrowth. Instead, the attention shifts towards the incorporation of completely different economic sectors (think of Amazon's take-over of a food supermarket chain). All the focus is on a tiny group of 'unicorns'. This logic has had a big impact on social networks and now spread to the taxi industry, hotels and restaurants. Internet companies have become privatized utility providers who behave like detached aristocrats. The 'platforms' present themselves as neutral and not of this world. They stand above us, busy bees, and look down on local economies from their global meta perspective. This is how the Big Five increasingly operate. Uber adopted this attitude and even gave a criminal twist. Certain bitcoin entrepreneurs firmly believe they are acting above the law. However, it didn't quite work out for these initiatives as more and more people understand the parasitic logic behind the self-proclaimed 'creative destruction'. These right-wing libertarian business models are destroying jobs, community, the social, without giving anything back. We should be happy with that and presume this is progress? Come together, right now and say no to these platforms! Our networks are valuable. We should not make our social relationships subordinate to commercial interests. Networks are tools to improve our lives. We should demand 'network freedom': let us decide how we want shape and run our communities. The technical coordinates of our networks right now are totally overdetermined by opaque commercial interests. This has to stop. There is no reason to limit the design of our social lives in such a way. A complex and rich social life online is not more expensive.

We need to organize ourselves and make sure that digital tools are actually empowering people's lives and raising living standards. With each apps or website we should ask ourselves: is this growing or decreasing income inequality? Who is benefiting? This needs a change of perspective. We should no longer be impressive with 'the new'. In order to reach this collective awareness we have to learn how the machines operate. We can no longer afford to delegate this to geeks and corporations. We're fooling

ourselves at the moment with comfort and usability improvements. There's a great role here for education, in combination with a renaissance of public infrastructure and 'the commons'. We're not just talking about a greater consumer awareness of online products. Schools at all levels need to give priority to coding (including 'critical making'). We should not accept mass unemployment because of the arrival of robots and let them destruct entire villages, cities and regions. Europe should develop its own platforms that have liberated themselves from the principle of the free. If we want a fair computerized economy, we should get used to paying for content and services, there is no other way.

This all starts with rebirth of online communities or tribes, for that matter. The name we give to the social is trivial. Let's come up with a cool and sexy name. And please, do not think that the brand of the 'communist party' has any street credibility. Another trap would be the PC identity labels. Let's not create new ghettos. What are the implicit unconscious social desires today? We need to claim it, design it, and then stick to it, and build up communities, one by one, brick by brick, member by members. This will have to happen in the shadow of events. There is no other way. But who knows... maybe things evolve very quickly. Be wary of hyper growth—and the gurus who preach it. It is not in our interest. It is time to ditch the entire start-up logic. Too many initiatives failed, for the wrong reason.

CF: What are the consequences of the growth of the sharing economy on social networks on users' identity, self-awareness and self-representation? Is "user" just a synonym for "consumer"?

GL: I am not so sure if the 'sharing economy' is really growing and going anywhere. This is yet another case where people start to get the dishonest business practices behind this label. Throughout Europe there is a growing awareness about the need for regulation—and local alternatives. Look at the growing opposition against Uber and Airbnb that are becoming symbols for quick and dirty centralized value extraction. There are concrete alternatives in the making, cooperative platforms that are post-parasitic, and are instead are based on free cooperation between different players and an idea of the commons. These systems still have "users," you are right in that respect. How can we make the transition from a consumer-driven to a citizen-centric approach? One of the ways is indeed to develop local system that people can be proud of. This is not all that hard to do. We need to demystify the technology at this point. To a great extent it is all about marketing and

sexiness. If you arrive in a new city, you need to install the local apps and visit the communal websites. This is already the case in Italy and elsewhere with local alternatives to Airbnb. This won't take long. One of the problems is of a different nature: that's the issue of identification and automatic payment. How can we centralize these two and make sure that the local networks and services are secure. Right now, identification and payments are decentralized. Everywhere we need to login again, create a profile, put in passwords. In this way, we can never build up local, decentralized services as small players will simply not be able to keep up in the current arms race. The question that's on the table is therefor: are we going delegate more and more of these features to centralized players, or do we take matters in our own hands?

CF: Facebook calls everyone in your network "friends". There are no other alternatives in terms of relationship definition. This brings me to three different and related questions about social media platforms: the first is about the choice of language, the second is on the conception of "otherness" and the last is about the relationships you can actually develop online and how they can influence relationships "in the flesh".

GL: The choice of language is certainly a freedom worth fighting for. Facebook is refusing to change at this level as user freedom would 'dilute' and fragment their databases and diminish their sales of these data to advertisers. I don't want go further into this issue. I left Facebook in 2009, and never missed it since. I am interested in alternatives. What's evil is the advertisement and data-driven business model of most social media. Social relations should not be commodified and sold to third parties. Period. Anyone who looked into Snowden and NSA and then into the Cambridge Analytica drama around Brexit and the election of Trump might understand that the core of the problem here are the secretive and arrogant nature of both Google and Facebook, as they are the ones that are gathering and centralizing these data of citizens in the first place. We can only guess why they do this. According to some it done to 'organize the world's information' with the aim to feed the AI, while others point at political ambitions of both to overtake the Democratic Party and secure the neo-liberal globalist business agenda.

We need to dismantle the social media logic itself. Instead of relying on 85-90% of their revenues from advertising, they should shift to subscriptions. The step is not all that hard and many of their customers will

follow—and will be relieved that this silly game will be over. As you indicate, the focus should be on 'meet up' type social networks that work on a local or regional level (depending on the seize of country… almost every distance in the Netherlands is considered local elsewhere). We can shift from a newsfeed and update-centered network, dominated by manipulative algorithms, towards a structure that is group and community focused. Again, this is not a major change. The big cultural shift will be the awareness that we, Europeans, can take command over the architecture and infrastructure in which people decide how the money (and profit) flows. There is hope: we put an end to the 'inevitable' centralization. We need a new balance between public utilities and local companies. That's the New Digital.

CF: What do you think could be the perspectives for networks as a social practice? How can technologies and infrastructures of social media be employed to overcome the monopoly of corporations such as Google and Facebook? What role could artists play in this process?

GL: The fact that the internet got stalled into a limited definition of the social is something we can overcome. We should no longer accept the current social media architectures as a natural order and instead make clear demands and express our desires. The social is going to be technological. This won't change. Social media are not a given. Of course there are fashions amongst the youngsters such as Snapchat, that's fine. But that should not distract us from the larger picture and the question how society large wants to communicate, and ultimately, make decisions. It's all about perception management and agenda setting, as it was called in old days, the 'fourth estate'. That's no longer newspapers, radio and television… I hope I am not upsetting anyone by saying this. But who can we talk to at Facebook and Google? No reply. We're facing a wall of organized arrogance. That's why need to make a hard cut, knowing that Brussels is not going to take the lead. It's local communities such as Berlin, Barcelona, Napoli, Amsterdam etc. that will have to take the lead in this digital exodus. This also gives more possibilities to involve artists. However, we should be wary to instrumentalize artists for this or that cause. The key issue is that we need to make sure that the next generation internet applications will have built-in peer-to-peer payment systems. Only a tiny percentage of contemporary artists are able to make a living from their work. Artists live well below the poverty line. How did we end up in this situation? We urgently need to get rid of the copyright system (which is the cause of the current inequality) and design systems that redistribute income. Artists will engage in the wider

debate if they know there's something in it for them. But it all start with the refusal, the courage to say no to the free economy, to fight precarious working conditions and revolt against the internet monopolies and show that another economy is possible!