

Speed interview with Geert Lovink
By Andrés Lomeña (Málaga, Spain)

AL: The current idea of just one Net brings to mind the beginnings of computer-mediated communication. In the early days the Internet had many competitors: a lot of mailboxes, intranets and corporations using different protocols were existing while the Internet was hovering out there, in the background. Then lots of servers died and a few phone companies took the control of ADSL (We already forget RTB and RDSI connections). The Amsterdam Digital City was one of the victims. To my interpretation this fact indicates a radical change in the virtual communities. New social networks are growing up around metacafe.com or slashdot.org, but not around 'cities' with own e-mails and common blurbs like a few years ago. Could you tell us about the state of investigations concerning these shifts?

GL: You are pointing at a rich history that is often forgotten and not yet properly written down. What the academic Internet life before 1985 in fact consisted of, very few people know. There is no comprehensive study done about it, as far as I know. That's different when we talk about Usenet, The Well and the mailbox scene that existed. Internet culture has been mapped thoroughly only after the rise of the Web, from around 1992. I am not sure what we can learn from all these changing platforms and communities. The actual role of community history to the bigger picture of how the Internet came into being remains uncertain. In the official histories that have appeared thus far they are playing a modest, but in the end insignificant role. It is obviously the virtual class of technologists and their incestuous relationships with entrepreneurs who are the Driving Forces of History. A wide-ranging study on what the actual role of virtual communities and social networks have played in the development of the Internet has not yet come out. Can communities themselves innovate technology or are they merely a spin-off effect? I have a political, not a scientific answer to this question. I believe that the role of user (groups) is underestimated. This is my belief system, if you like. But we should leave open the option that they are utterly irrelevant and just a product of the application. It can very well be that communities come into play years or even decades after the Technology no longer plays a role in History (read: in the male-driven war machine). We have to be ready to face the techno-determinist Reality-even if we reject it from an ethic point of view.

AL: I like your analysis of "mass psychology". I think this is one of the main

factors for understanding Internet. Who is the most contemporary thinker about this? Ortega y Gasset, Sloterdijk, Le Bon? And what are the most important differences between traditional masses and cybermasses?

GL: Mass psychology is a vanished discipline. It disappeared without much fuzz in the 1980s after a turbulent century of existence, for a number of reasons that I cannot discuss here. Apart from the fascination for the 'fate' of dead fields of knowledge within social sciences and the humanities there is a way to read mass psychology as a critical analogy, as a mirror, an allegory or, let's say, a radical encounter with something uncontemporary that invites you to rethink the common. Obviously there is no fear anymore amongst the (Western) elites that the gray masses will take over the streets and in this way will gain political power. There are still huge masses out in the open, but they have been neutralized as travelers that shop and entertain. It is obvious that masses these days are multitudes, they are colorful and identity-driven. They are heterogeneous, not homogeneous, and so on. But these worthy political statements can also merely be illusions. We should not too easily dismiss the idea of the 'crowds' that are capable of acting. The critical aspect however is the regained visibility of the 'cybermasses', as you call them. Unlike mass-media, where the masses became individualized but abstract, this time the online-masses are visible, and have the capability to steer events. Whether they use their interactive capacity is another issue. Wikipedia can't be the end of the 'wisdom of the crowds'. Humankind must be able to deliver something more interesting.

AL: Inside the university faculties McLuhan is perceived too mystic and Shannon & Weaver too obvious. What should be the role of such theories for new generations of journalists? In my opinion we must change communications studies f cultural studies or cultural theory into something more broader and operative.

GL: I fear that your suggestion is coming two decades too late. What both disciplines have failed to do is to study the technological foundations of todays society. It is not enough to do this either through the communications or the identity paradigm, even though computer networks can be understood through both research discourses. What fails here is a critical edge, an urge to look beyond the appearances for something that is fundamental. These days I would not call for a broader understanding of new media. What we need is technologically savvy researchers who are willing to make their hands dirty (read: learn how to program) and who can intervene, and not

just observe. We are faced with this enormous and exciting challenge that artists, activists and research should understand that they can shape the technology. We're no longer bystanders or merely consumers (well, compared to the military, we of course are...).

AL: In my opinion, 2008 could be the end of peer to peer. Websites like megarotic.com (Porn videos) or stage6.com (movies, comedy, and so on) are offering complete high definitions movies (For instance, Sicko, by Michael Moore). We do not know if companies are going to criminalize this new context, or if they will use this in a commercial way (Like itunes.com). What will happen? For example, video rental stores could be definitively dying; video-on-demand is already here if you look at www.joost.com).

GL: Indeed, and it's been going really fast over the past year, just as happened to music a few years ago. However, I am not a guru and I do not wish to predict the future. That's simply not my job. Media platforms will change, and we got plenty of media revolutions ahead of us, but we all know that they do not, by definition, change the underlying mechanism of global capitalism. I am not saying this to dismiss the Internet or play down its role but we have to also see the clear limits of the 'change' that is being preached by the Web 2.0 folks is operating. When I hear Silicon Valley consultants talking about 'change' I always become suspicious and think: yes, change, in the wrong direction! Change is not by definition good in itself. And also, technological change will not always change social relations in society for the better. This is the case of peer-to-peer (and its enemies). Other ways of information distribution do not have to be a danger for corporate interest at large.

AL: You told Internet is a "meta-media", the last media, integrating the old ones. Is it a right forecast, or is it always the same fear about the emerging media (Cinema over radio, tv over cinema, etcetera)?

GL: It is a joke to say that Internet is the "medium to end all media." That's the wet dream of the neo-liberal consultant class. Of course history will be messy and complex, non-function and multi-layered, confused and deeply Babylon. What we see is an increased 'convergence'. But that's abstract. On the level of cable and software and actual machines there is an eternal miscommunication of competing standards, bugs, wrong version, delayed updates and so on.

AL: Who is your favorite thinker of Internet (or media)? Benkler, Barbrook, Boris Groys?

GL: Nice series of Bs. But in my case I would mention Elias Canetti, Klaus Theweleit, Friedrich Kittler, Vilem Flusser, Lev Manovich and Saskia Sassen. Still, that's not my approach. I prefer to read philosopher that have no immediate or obvious connection with the world of media and computers. My preference for negative thinkers is a fact that I hardly deny.

AL: Do you think that the ideas of Jacob Nielsen are dangerous? I thought he was not such an important figure.

GL: Yes, I'd love to have enemies... If only Jacob Nielsen was our enemy combatant, hunted down by the global army of Internet critics. He is not. His usability theories indeed are influential in schools but they are not uncontroversial. Most interaction design teachers that I know reject Nielsen. The problem is that there is hardly any public debate about what constitutes or good website or blog. Nielsen's dogmas are rigid and indeed ridiculous. But there are also useful elements in his religious belief system. At least we got a boxing ball. But the main problem with Nielsen is that in essence he is an expensive corporate consultant, not a public intellectual. The main reason why we reject him is exactly because he is not a critic.

AL: Nowadays, what is the biggest lack in the Internet studies?

GL: I am not sure if we 'lack' something. Of course it would have been nicer if the Internet would have opened up in the 1970s, when there were loads of critical social movements around, but the PCs weren't there yet. PCs and the Internet are children of the sixties, that is, of a specific type of Californian counterculture. But as we all know, there have been a wide range of political movements, back then. Is it still a mystery why exactly the white-male techno-libertarianism has become the hegemonic Internet ideology. The active involvement of progressive activists is there, we can reconstruct its traces in Silicon Valley, but by and large they lost out. The left simply did not understand that this was a unique field with plenty of opportunities to positively intervene. Their relative absence is one of the reasons why new media culture has such an awkward relation to the 'public domain'. There is sympathy, but in the end the private enterprise logic always prevails. In part we should also blame the techno-phobic activists who were too slow to understand the key importance of software architectures and infrastructures.

This all had an impact on Internet studies, to come to your question, that has been by and large academic, from an early start. The cultural dimension of

the Net has been downplayed for decades. There is nothing against academic research, but in this case it all had a very low start and was primarily focussed on internal dynamics of people concerned with their own tenure, book publications and career tracks. As a result we see that both social sciences and humanities are running behind the facts and can hardly keep up. The research cultures are outdated: why would you do a phd that takes four years and have results published at some stage that are up to many years old? Why do books still play such an important role? Why aren't there leading online journals that incorporate social networking functions? In the current setup Internet studies is condemned to writing history-and even that is not done in a proper way. Whereas media theory has presented interesting historical insights, it has been blatantly absent in the contemporary debates. Postmodern theory is here to blame, that's for sure. The lack of technical expertise amongst cultural critics is still stunning.

Keep in mind: nothing is lost. We are still at the very beginning. A new generation can move in and start from scratch and no one would notice. Remember that it took film at least two decades before writers took notice and started to take the medium serious. Often I am accused of being a pessimist, but in terms of an intelligent and informed 'net criticism' I see a bright future ahead of us!