

The Dark Side of the Free and Open-Interview with Geert Lovink @ Ars Electronica, Linz, September 4, 2010.

By Mateja Rot (Artwords Magazine, Slovenia)

Mateja Rot: You entitled your lecture on the Open Source Life symposium at Festival Ars Electronica 2010 [*The Meaning of Open is Obfuscated*](#). Can you explain what is so problematic about 'open'?

Geert Lovink: The core of the debate is the following: is there something wrong with the implementation of 'open' or should we attack the 'open' concept heads on and reject it all together? I am working on this with the Australian theorist [Nate Tkacz](#). The idea of 'non-commodity production' is a start here. That's what is clearly good about things called open: that they are not commodities. The problem is then how to sustain people who want to produce non-commodities within a commodity driven society. When we advocate free and open, and rally against copyright, we have to become aware of the larger economic context, in particular in this long era of recession. Geeks and academics with a stable income have little idea about precarious living conditions. We have to always ask: who is speaking? Who is pushing artists to give away their products for free? Why do they limit their examples to innocent amateurs and refuse to speak about young professionals? Do they have any idea what it means that you cannot make a living from your profession?

The free and open concepts were transplanted from the context of computer programming and in particular, operating systems like Linux to the cultural-creative context. This has been done with the best of intentions, however, without consulting those who work in arts and culture. Geeks, programmers and computer scientists are very much in demand in society. Without them all infrastructure collapses. This is (unfortunately) not the case with artists. So far geeks have never had any problems securing an income, even if we take global outsourcing of their work into account. As a result they have little idea what happens if you transport the free and open mantras into other contexts where people are working under harsh neoliberal circumstances struggling to make a living.

Let's also not forget that free and open is also pushed by telecoms and hardware manufacturers. Apple is the perfect example of this with their paradoxical strategy of 'rip mix burn' on the one and tight copyright restrictions inside iTunes on the other. We also have to keep in mind that

free and open is not one ideological block. Twelve years they had their big schism between free software and open source. There is an enormous amount of licenses under which software can be published, used and altered. This is where we should end up with the creative output as well. What we need is a proliferation of different revenue models. In the talk here in Linz I am going to talk about a few projects that work in this direction such as [Kickstarter](#), [Flattr](#), [Kachingle](#) and [ThankThis](#). We should also learn from the recent mistakes of [Sellaband](#) and [FabChannel](#).

MR: On one hand, new media offer creativity and self-realization to users, but on the other hand they exert power and control over them. Could we say that new media strengthen neoliberal capitalism in this way?

GL: True. But the problem is that evangelists of new media will never admit this. We need harsh critique and a thorough deconstruction of business and marketing strategies here. The free and open preachers always circumvent these discussions. This is why we need plenty of space for Hegelian, dialectical, Žižek's style negative energy to attack the agenda of these corporate consultants. A unique opportunity for more Slovenian critics to come on board. We need to get a better idea what exactly attracts average users in the techno-libertarian rhetoric that we find on Techcrunch and related websites. The problem is that especially young people have no idea that they are undermining their own livelihood. I'm not saying that we can go back to the Microsoft-backed intellectual property right regimes. In my talk here in Linz I present projects that come up with concrete proposals to invent new revenue models. This is my main critique of Creative Commons. It is OK to develop the licenses and so on but they should be launched together with concrete proposals how artists are going to make a living. We cannot draw our hands from this issue and make it an individual problem.

MR: What was the main reason that you quit with centralized social networks? I'm referring to the [Quit Facebook Day](#) of 31 May 2010, which you also joined.

GL: The main reason is the way Facebook is treating privacy. The whole business model of Facebook sucks to the core. But for me that was not the main reason to join Quit Facebook Day. There is a critical mass building up with Facebook alternatives such as [GNU Social](#), [Diaspora](#), [Appleseed](#) and [Crabgrass](#). Maybe it is my background as a squatter and tactical media activist, but I believe that radical critique in this field is only effective if you have powerful prototypes of alternatives in the making. We are in the unique

position that we can develop these alternatives. We are not powerless victims or passive spectators in this social media game. This is the amazing side how the internet operates. There is still this possibility to develop alternative platforms within the same technological framework—though I am not sure for how long.

MR: What's the solution to the current situation of quasi-serviceability of media, which has huge consequences on society as a whole by controlling, managing personal data and generating information on our lives? Maybe it lies in the Rousseauian 'back to nature' moment? Is this perhaps the highest level of openness as an idea?

GL: Depending on how you look at it, the highest state of openness is either complete noise, or, following Jamie King, a perfect mirror of existing inequalities, neither of which is particularly desirable. There are no indications that 'back to nature' implies that we become less depending on technology. We do not see Luddite undercurrents in the current movements and subcultures. The desire to radically disconnect has always existed. Certain subcultures like travelers, gypsies, ravers and punks have always existed. But I'm not so much into that identity spiel. I'm more interested in how we can develop radical alternatives for those who live under the dominant neoliberal regime. That is our challenge. It's much easier in new media compared to, for instance, changing the educational system where you have all these endless institutional restraints and delays. One of the good things about our field is that it's still quite fluid. If you have a good idea, come together, conspire and start to organize something initiatives often takes off and scale up easily. And we also benefit from the fact that things are so easy to copy. We can build appealing, viral alternatives to Facebook that are decentralized.

MR: You are an advocate of the [Slow Media Manifesto](#). Can you explain the main idea behind it, what objectives it tries to achieve and what possible results/solutions it might have for the future?

GL: Slow communication is a response to the development on the level of real-time internet exchange. It is a paradigm shift that we see happening with Twitter and the availability of internet on mobile phones that people carry with them. If it's done in a playful way there is nothing wrong with real-time but we all know it is quite addictive. These days 'labour' and 'play' are difficult to distinguish and this has been theorized at the [New York 2009 iDC conference](#) (organized by Trebor Scholz). We emphasize the playful level

of these communications while attacking their constraints in terms of neoliberal labour conditions. That is quite difficult. I think it would be interesting to create more widgets between them, maybe also to make clear that what starts off as something playful that people like will soon dominate their daily lives and will not only infiltrate their private lives - that's the privacy aspect - but will also dominate the pace of their work life.

Because it's harder and harder to separate private life - the offline life and work online. That separation absolutely doesn't exist anymore. People are going to find out after a while that this necessity to always be online, to tell where you are, what you do, what you think, how you feel is also an incredible constraint, not only a possibility. It becomes an obligation. People will perhaps regain freedom. I'm not a Luddite, I'm not preaching the merits of the beautiful offline life. But what I do advocate is the mastery. Mastery not so much on the individual level as a skill or as a virtue but mastery as a collective challenge. It is important to say that it's not my individual problem that I'm twittering too much. I don't want to treat this issue on the level of addiction. It is dangerous to go in that direction because then again you individualize the implications of the real-time internet economy. There is a collective aspect to how we deal with these technologies. We will collectively try to understand the good part of it but also crush down and say no to the bad side of it.

MR: Now, I'd like to ask you about your work. Back in 2004 you founded the Institute of Network Cultures. You have carried out a number of new media conferences and projects within the institute so far. Can you outline a few most recent notorious projects you've been developing?

GL: The most successful one is [Video Vortex](#), which started in October 2007, only two years after YouTube was founded. Before YouTube I've been involved with a lot of artist and activist groups that experimented with streaming media. For us the question of online video and audio has been around since the days of the support campaigns for [B92](#), the alternative radio station in Belgrade that opposed the war efforts of Milošević. YouTube presented an in-browser solution for something that many other players like RealPlayer and others from Microsoft couldn't resolve. This made it possible to watch a video within the same browser. The rise of broadband together with internet on mobile phones caused online video to take off. I don't want to reduce Video Vortex only to YouTube criticism. The evil Google Corporation owns YouTube, we all know that. Even though Google has a

near monopoly position in the search market, this is not really the case with online video. There are a lot of interesting developments in aesthetics, alternative delivery platform, open source and free software initiatives. What is the role of artists and curators when everyone can upload a video? The Institute has co-organized five Video Vortex conferences so far and we are still excited. The next big one is in March 2011, in Amsterdam. One took place in Split in May 2009 and most likely there will be one coming up in Zagreb in 2012.

MR: Apart from your involvement at the institute you are also working as Professor of Media Theory at European Graduate School.

GL: Yeah, that's my new appointment.

MR: And what courses do you teach at the University of Amsterdam?

GL: Because I am there two days a week I only give one course a year. Funny enough, I'm the theorist who teaches the practical course—but activists don't mind that! What I do is run the [Masters of Media blog](#), together with the students. This collaborative student blog exists since 2006 and is now filled by the fifth generation. On 2 September we welcomed almost 60 new students in our masters program and over the next two months I'm going to work with them on the blog. The courses are in English and around half of the students come from outside of the Netherlands.

MR: Are you also preparing a new publication at the moment?

GL: Yeah, I'm preparing my forth book on critical internet culture which should be finished next year. For the time being it has a working title The Network Condition and comes out with Polity Press. I also continue my collaboration with Ned Rossiter. At the Institute of Network Cultures I am preparing two new readers, one on critical Wikipedia research and a follow-up on the Video Vortex reader that deals with the politics and aesthetics of online video.

MR: Speaking of releasing new media literature, is it even relevant since new media practices develop constantly and it is difficult to publish only a printed book when its finished - as some of the content will already be obsolete by then. Are you also offering content on your site?

GL: With the exception of our [NAi series](#) we publish pretty much all our text

online (as well as in print). What we need to tackle is the bigger question of scientific journals and academic publishing. One could say that we have already resolved the delivery problem. The Open Access movement is gaining momentum. The problem lies elsewhere, on the institutional level. One of the related problems is the discredited peer review system (“If you do not quote me I will not pass your paper”) Peer review has resulted in conformism and is cracking down on creativity, dissent and is bad for theory. Peer review in social sciences, arts and humanities has resulted in endless streams of boring formalistic articles that had to be written for no other reason than people securing their jobs and the tribal positions of their respective clans. This blandness and spiritual poverty needs to be tackled within the larger context of Open Access. We also know that the quotation indexes do work in the humanities. I don’t mind if most academic journals would disappear. The system is sick to the core and I doubt if transformation of that system into Open Access journals will work out. This is a unique time in which we reinvent what academic publishing could be all about. What is needed is much more open ways to develop new concepts, for instance how discuss and develop arguments. How do we design debate? There is still no possibility in the current Open Access. Why is that? Peer review circles are trying to maintain their power behind closed doors. But the problem here is institutional, not technological.

TR: What are current network culture trends, principles of networking and new developments (or applications) that could be reforming/reshaping new media field?

GL: There is enough change. The question is, in what direction. Yes, we can create national webs, abolish net neutrality, further increase surveillance. These are all happening. Trend watching is so passive and old school, as if we’re outsiders. We now have the possibility to create the future. If we live in a network society, how do we want to organize the communication flows? Is state involvement only a matter of regulation after the next crash? Are there other forms of public involvement possible? How about this idea of the ‘common’? What we need to invent are new forms of organization. We got enough technical tools now. The trick will be how to connect the real and the virtual, the network and the city in a productive way—and then figuring out how to politize the everyday life with it.

TR: When talking about blogs: they enable everyone to become a writer launching their own work to the public. Is this a possible upgrade of

democracy or merely a fashion where we quickly find ourselves in the inflation of online texts with no significant effect whatsoever? What are your guiding principles when teaching students how to blog, also in reference to your last published book *Zero Comments* from 2007?

GL: No doubt can blogging be seen as revival of (online) writing. There are just so many more people that are literate these days. But I wonder if the conservative part of the population, let's say, those in charge, are charmed about the qualities of these musings. People generally complain about the quality—and there is plenty of reasons to justify these complains. However, these attacks are targetted at professionals and their amoral populism and sloppyness. In terms of blog education I always emphasize the rule of quality over quantity. Blog posting do not have to be long. What's important for me is that they provide the reader with a personal voice, grouped around a link. This is the basic [Dave Winer](#) definition, which is still in place. I also point at all the useful tips how to compose a compelling blog posting on the [Problogger](#) site. In terms of critical writing, there is now finally a book we recommend: *Blog Theory* by [Jodi Dean](#). Whether students enjoy my own writing is not relevant. I try hard not just to teach my own theses on a subject. When I was a student I always hated that. Blogging is first and foremost an expedition, trying to find your own voice. This is done within the metier of 'electronic writing'. That is, students need to link and tag, include illustrations, be aware of the implications of reading and develop skills to compress their thoughts.

TR: "Open source life is a form of politics," said Amelia Andersdotter, elected member of the European Parliament and representative of Swedish Piratpartiet. On the Open Source Life symposium she expressed the idea that we need to repair democracy. Can we even do this or are we beyond repair, to say it in your words?

GL: I fully with Amelia Andersdotter. Open source is a form of politics, based on habits one has to develop. Many academics, politicians, researchers and consultants, paid by the public purse, are still hiding their outcomes. They do not like to share. This will change over time, but we can't say that 'the system' is rewarding sharing right now. Whether democracy is 'beyond repair' is something we need to discuss in wider contexts. The problem is the isolation of the different discourses and practices. The new media community needs to build bridges with, let's say, theatre makers, migrant movements, and those that discuss the crisis in politics like Zizek, Negri,

Badiou or circles like Laclau and Mouffe. There is no technical fix for the current democratic deficit. But there are alternative ideas floating around. We need to insert our knowledge of organized networks, the critique of social media and the exploitation of weak ties into the general debate about what is to be done. In exchange, the leading intellectuals will have to admit, will have to back to school and understand that is the network age. There is no way back. Discourse analysis and deconstruction alone will not do the job. Media does not equal Hollywood plus MTV minus CNN. It's time for a collective upgrade of the critical forces. This is not a major drama but nonetheless a necessary precondition to develop a collective imaginary that appeals to many.