Interview with Geert Lovink by freelance journalist Vincius Cherobino
For the Brazilian science magazine Galileu

VC: How would you interpret the reactions from media outlets in regards to blogs and internet comments in general?

GL: The story goes that in the mythological Golden Age of blogging, around 2002, blogs were lively, interconnected communities. Bloggers would left comments on each others blogs and linked to each other. Then the so-called 'power law' set in, which meant that traffic started go to fewer and fewer sites. In this process of concentration, with traffic flowing towards a hand full of sites, I would locate the current crisis of internet commentary. The failure to distribute commentary across the internet is odd. It leads to less discussion amongst the online participants and more 'spectacle' (if you want to use that term for the online sphere to start with). The larger the site, the bigger the chance that people post frustrated one-liners. Because of the increased visibility of the selected sites where lots of conversations are happening we started to see an osmosis of heated debates turned blabbering with the current political climate in most countries, which happens to be right wing populism and anti-Islam nationalism. Mainstream comment cultures these days is pretty fucked up. The overall economic situation is tense and when people are given the freedom to say whatever they want, they tend not respond in a rational way but they start to scream and shout. It is too easy to accuse the mainstream press of misrepresenting the innocent internet. Few people read comments. Fair enough, but in this way we also miss out on on digging out hidden discussions and tensions in society. Where is the critical scholarship that takes this these semiotic mud flows seriously? It would be great if we could develop a new literary genre that summarizes and then builds further on comments. They are great resources for novels, films and non-fiction works.

VC: How do you personally relate to comments? Is it common for you to have an article or a post heavily criticized by an internet commentator? If not, how do you think your reaction might be?

GL: I like reading responses, but I also know out of experience how hard it is to read all 528 replies to a stories, and then add yours. Or summarize them. Internet research so far has spent little time figuring out what to do with comments. You can visualize them and perhaps do an automated textual analysis, but in the end the best thing really is to sit down… and read them all. In my next book which comes out in a few months with Polity Press I

propose a general theory of comment culture in which I contrast the current situation with historical hermeneutics and the rich history of commentary. My main source of inspiration here is the German media theorist Cornelia Vismann who died a year of cancer, way too young. She made, at least for me, for the first time a connection between the rich history of commentary, law, media theory, cybernetics and internet culture. Another source of inspiration would be Comments are largely overlooked, and the overall situation doesn't look very promising. Comments are on the rise as never before but at the same time they are dispised, looked down upon, ignored, filtered and switched off.

VC: Do you think that internet comments tend to be more aggressive than a "live" reaction from a person, lets say, in a pub? In other words, did the internet somehow facilitate the use of harsher tones in comments?

GL: It is known that internet responses are more direct and provocative in comparison to real life encounters. In part this is exactly because you do not see the person you are attacking. Whether or not people do this in pubs yes or no very much depends on local cultures and national characteristics. Some cultures are more impulsive, lifely and become physical, whereas other get stuck in stiff, so-called civilized rhetoric. Internet culture can be raw, but so is society. I often think how internet culture would look like if the internet wasn't just born in the late 1960s but would have developed much faster and would have become available to the social movements and counter cultures of that time. How would the comment cultures would have looked like during the Vietnam war, the Summer of Love and all the debates over neo-marxism, psycho analysis and structuralism?

VC: Do you believe that internet comments and all the aggressive debate that usually surrounds it is part of web democracy?

GL: It is not useful to speak of 'democracy' in the context of internet comments. Apart from the question if internet democracy exists in the first place, we need to remind ourselves that we are always guests wherever we post a comment. We visit the website of someone else, a company etc. and it is not very useful in this respect to talk about users rights. When we post a comment we make use of the hospitality of the host. It would be idealistic to think that our comments are not going to be deleted. Of course they could be. This is the right of the host, and if you run our own blog or forum we also make use of that right to remove comments we do not like, that are annoying, silly or discriminatory. Adversaries and competitors are kicked off.

We also need to talk about filtering and personalization here. Comments can be filtered by both the host and the user. The right to have a free and open dialogues and discussion on the internet simply does not exist. Blogs are not town hall meetings or public demonstrations. The public domain only exists in terms of the right to host one's own site. If you're interested in theories on conflict and hospitality, please read what Jacques Derrida has to say about this. Even communities with an egalitarian culture have to deal with these issues. In the end, it is the moderator who decides. It is important to remind new users about this very fact. There are always power relations in networked technological environments. Facebook and Twitter are commercial environments, and it doesn't take much to be banned on those social networking sites.

VC: The internet showed that anonymity can generate fascinating things – from the political documents from Wikileaks to the entertainment provide by fake bloggers (such as the fake Steve Jobs) or fake twitter accounts. At the same time anonymity also hides criminals. What is your opinion about the current push of Facebook and Google+ against anonymity?

GL: I am glad anonymity is more discussed these days, but that's only because it is in danger and on the verge of disappearance. In my new book Networks Without a Cause I am calling for a new practice of 'mass anonymity'. For me anonymity is a serious part of political life, and not just 'fake'. Yes, we need to be cautious not to give the impression that it is possible on the internet to hide one's 'real' identity. In the last instance it is always to find out, no matter how many sophisticated cryptography and VPNs we use. But what we could do start is pollute the main databases. Just start to get into the habit not giving the correct answer, leave a few questions unanswered and, if possible, have one or two pseudonyms at hand. As we know now, Google+ is pursuing us to use our 'true' identities because they are planning to use this identification platform for their future online banking service. Soon people will be forced to use Facebook and Google IDs to purchase goods and services. So, besides the obvious link between identity and the war on privacy and the 'paranoid' 9/11 aspect of NSA, CIA and others secret services that track our behavior and opinions, there is an economic aspect behind the crusade against anonymity that we need to further investigate.

VC: Apparently media corporations (like the NY Times) responded against harsh comments by prohibiting commentators' anonymity. Do you see this as

a proper solution? Is there anything lost with the end of anonymity in comments?

GL: There are, for instance, German politicians who argue that democracy cannot exist properly if people say something anonymously. Citizens have to present their arguments by first telling who they are. This naive view of an abstract power-free public sphere of deliberation is countered by countless critical studies that show how power is being played out here. Having deviant and 'exetreme' opinions comes with a cost. Before you know it you're a terrorist. There is not much freedom in the neo-liberal state. Ever tried to defend a dissident position inside large institutions such as banks or universities? The pressure to go with the flow and not speak out are growing. This tendency stands in contrast with the spectacular increase of channels that individuals have access to if they want to voice their discontent. This is what the managerial instruments of surveillance and 'perception management' aim at: mass conformism is on the rise–and we often do not even experience it as such. It all seems of reasonable: if you speak out, say who you are, be moderate and remain positive. If you, like me, are passionate about the historical energies of negative criticism, you are spoiling the party and should be sidelined.

VC: The ambivalence about internet comments is fascinating. On one side, there is a need, and often an active search, for comments (after all, they define the blog or news story status). Receiving a lot of comments are a proof of relevance. On the other hand, you have a really negative reaction from the content producers' when the comments are harsh or simply aggressive. How do you look at this? Is it feasible to claim that the internet comments is a paradoxical in nature?

GL: You are right. We all hope to gather lots of comments, but are upset when they turn negative or take the topic in an entirely different direction. It could very well be that the current era of mass commentary on the net will come to a close. Imagine WW III caused by some evil internet forum and the conversations that emerged there. It is a question whether comments in the near future will be a public as they are right now–if they exist at all. The current trend of fast, short, moody comments comes close to informality of oral culture and might not be written down in the near future. It could also be the case that commentary starts to organize itself and for instance block off Google and other search engines so that remarks can be made more freely and become really topical in the sense that do not leave that one

particular discursive context. The paradox that you point at can easily escalate, zero itself out and thus turn against online commentary altogether. If we look at the 'open' internet nothing is God-given.

VC: How do you see the cases of paid comments? How widespread they are? The most famous case is the 50 cent army in China, but here in Brazil we have many cases of marketing agencies making their interns commenting in sites and blogs to enhance the Google results (as part of a SEO strategy).

GL: Paid interactivity in general is widespread. We haven't even discussed spam here, the main reason why so many open channels were closed and became moderated by editors (with a little help of our bots).

VC: Some scholars regard comments as an indivisible part of the content. This kind of participation is, in their opinion, what differentiates internet content from other types of media production (in particular news stories). Would you agree? Going further, do you think that the rise of internet comments really means more dialogue?

GL: Many devices and sites lure their users to please please post comments. From the perspective of those who run the big sites this strategy is obvious because for them this is yet another indicator how many (active) users they really have. It doesn't really matter what the responses are, as long as we click and participate. I would not say that more responses means more dialogue. I have a personal bias for forum software and have been waiting for a next generation of this software for a long time. A global renaissance of the forum software would be a great thing for internet culture. Of course one could say that it has never been away… that's true. Forums have also been popular in certain countries and regions and less so in others. All true. We cannot expect much from blogs and news sites. Their software architecture is simply too a-symmetrical. The 'friends' filters make Facebook unsuitable for interesting debates with different voices. And the 140 character limitation of Twitter makes it hard to turn such a dialogue into a discourse in which people develop an argument (even tough I know some who defends Twitter culture by saying that the limitation combined with real-time and high participation numbers sometimes lead to interesting debates). The few collaborative blogs where 10 or 20 authors publish together is a promising model that could be further cultivated. What we need are larger, flat sites that make it easy to contribute and respond. For me comments need to be put in the centre and should not be pushed to the margins, even if they were there historically. The world out there is turbulent, and speeds up. What we

now need are platforms where we can set up large scale debates. Social media have linked up people, now it time to start doing something with this network power.