Interview with Geert Lovink by Anna Masera (La Stampa)

Q &A on the road from Amsterdam via Milano to Torino, June 13, 2012

A somewhat shorter version, in Italian, on the La Stampa website here.

AM: Your book "Networks Without A Cause" (translated in Italian as "Collective Obsessions") is a very articulate work, hard to summarize in one interview. What is the message you intend to underline most when you'll be presenting your new book in Italy, and that you think should be the headline of this interview? Keep in mind that in Italy most people are on Facebook, some on Twitter, hardly anyone on other social networks.

GL: In the book I come up with the following summary. It is the first paragraph of the introduction:

"Once the internet changed the world; now the world is changing the internet. Its mainstreaming is well and truly over, and the forgettable Web 2.0 saga has run its course. The participatory crowds suddenly find themselves in a situation full of tension and conflict—an unwelcome state of affairs for the pragmatist class who oversaw the internet's formation from the beginning. Criticism of Google and Facebook's privacy violations is on the rise. Conflicts over net neutrality and WikiLeaks demonstrate that the friction-free days of 'multi-stakeholder' governance—a loose coalition of corporations, NGOs, and engineers who kept state officials and old-school telecoms at bay, most notably through the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) meetings—are now over. A bubble has burst again, but this time in the form of the collapsing libertarian consensus model. Internet regulators who favored business and barred state intervention are moving into defense mode. Now that society has overruled their freewheeling ethic, the notion of the internet as an exceptional, unregulated sphere evaporates. The moment of decision bears upon us: which side are you on?"

The emphasis here is on Web 2.0 and the age of user-generated content that is coming to a close. It is hard to say if is that right now, in the immediate aftermath of the failed Facebook IPO on the NASDAQ. I am interested in that conflict-making potential of today's tools because it so clearly moved away from the neo-liberal Third Way consensus era. We can see the Arab Spring, Wikileaks, Anonymous and Occupy as examples of this next cyberculture.

AM: I confess: after 12 years as "web editor", already vexed by tons of

emails and a net slave lifestyle (which ruined my eyesight to say the least), my new role as "social media editor" of my newspaper is making me obsessive and compulsive about Twitter and other social news postings (I use also G+ and Storify, and Pinterest, Instagram for photos) and comments and mobile messaging.

GL: Twitter was made for journalism and I still believe it is more related to the news industry than the internet business, it is the perfect expression of news going real-time, without any delay or editorial buffer, with the additional value that the actors themselves are becoming involved, directly, with the exception of the famous few, the VIPs that have public relations officers twittering for them. That element of subjectivation is what it makes interesting, and thrilling if you are really into it. I find Twitter less suitable for ordinary users, even though there is this attractive side of sending short messages to each other (but you can do that with so many applications and platforms). Facebook is more protected. As you indicate yourself, the info professional is overwhelmed, in particular because of the rise of the informal feedback channels on top of the already busy official channels. If you had to go to the East-Indies during the time of the Dutch colonial system your working years were counting double. It's the same if you are part of the 24/7 online news flow. You wear out twice as fast.

AM: I am worried about my future. What do you suggest people like me should do to keep their sanity (besides quitting their job, which i cannot contemplate)? Somewhere I read you said that soon it won't be cool to check for messages on the smart phone all the time. Why so? And what will be cool?

GL: I am not a trend guru. Decide for yourself what will be cool. I would indeed look away from real-time media. That's not so hard, just start to de-install, delete and unsubscribe. Blast telenervosity and stop checking that phone. You do not have to leave the field of new media as such. Do not mix up the two. What we need are more investigative journalists, informed intellectuals with a humanities background. We need writers who follow up on 'social media' stories, who can describe the bigger picture of the IT industry—and not just from a hardware perspective like in the case of Apple. Just think of the politics of big data and the big software contracts for the health industry and education, here in Italy. You do not have to visit exotic places and only focus on Silicon Valley. Just let it go, that fast pace of the latest news, those RSS feeds, urgent emails and the social networking noise.

Work on a few big stories and sell them. Give yourself enough time to build up a reputation. And yes, build up a social network of informants. Do not confuse such a career move with the (justified) offline desires for the beach and the summer house. Real-time can become addictive, not the computer as such. What counts on the long run are the larger chunks of critical work. You will get more satisfaction out of that in comparison to the five seconds of fame that a tweet will provide you.

AM: You quit Facebook. I had the privilege to meet and interview Eben Moglen, another big critic of that social network. He says Facebook is destined to disappear soon because it is a closed network that violates privacy. Do you agree? Do you think those are the reasons it is doomed or are there others?

GL: I agree with Eben Moglen. His reasons were mine, but I also have to say that I quit because I befriended everyone. My mistake. After a while I had 2000 'friends' and I had no idea anymore who I was talking to. I wasn't looking for yet another one-way PR medium to promote my work. They were all nice people, for sure. I never predicted that Facebook would disappear altogether, at best that it would stagnate. This is also what we see happening with Orkut, Hyves and even MySpace. The professional news and IT class moves on but a certain percentage of the ordinary population is simply too lazy to follow the advice of the trend watchers. Interestingly these platforms can then start to have a second life, even commercially.

AM: Do you use Identi.ca, the open alternative to Facebook? Or any other social network that you consider worthwhile? Do you have any favorites and for what reason? What is your technological lifestyle like?

GL: I tried Twitter a few times but haven't gotten into it yet. I like my blog and have so many web publication platforms at my disposal that are all connected to Facebook and Twitter. People across the globe can find out immediately what I have written, share this and respond to it. However, I remain most open to email. That's the case for most geeks and early internet users like me. I am online most of the time but try to have some offline space for me and my family as well. This is why I have been wary of walking around with a smart phone. I need distance to reflect on the cultural and political dimensions of all these tools.

AM: What do you criticize most about Twitter? Are you not on it? (I can't find you…) If so, did you try it to make up your mind about it?

GL: The best Twitter critic is Dave Winer, read him. Over the past ten years I have been a big fan of his scripting.com blog. He is the inventor of the RSS feed for blogs (the syndication software) and a ruthless promoter of the decentralized nature of internet-based communications. He argued in many instances against centralized services such as Twitter. I love his metaphor of the internet-based news production as a "river". You sit and watch it passing by. Centralized services on the other hand do not like these flows. They are obsessed building their cathedrals (built of content bricks, held together by social ties of the workers). Winer also pointed at the politics of Twitter in the choice of the 'trending' topics. These are not neutral tools and have been programmed in the interest of Twitter itself. The second reference here would be Dimitri Kleiner's work. He developed an alternative to Twitter called Thimbl. Unfortunately it was never build and remained a conceptual art piece.

AM: Are there any aspects that you consider positive about the present choice of social networks?

GL: The positive aspect of social networks is that people get in contact with each other. I am not cynical about that but think we can do a much better job there in terms of creating groupware as they called it in the past. To reduce individuals to their known circle of friends I find very limiting.

AM: Were social platforms on the Internet built to empower the people or simply to make money off them? Or a mix of both?

GL: Most of them were founded with the sole aim to make money. There is not mysterious or scandalous about that. The more time we spend using a service, the more we share this experience with others, the more valuable that particular service is becoming. The question here should be turned to us instead: how can we design public facilities and infrastructures that can compete, and take over, from commercial players that only make profits by cheating on their customers, becoming parasites. Google is the most clear case in this respect. They cannot be transparent how they make money. If their behind-the-back revenue models were known to the general public, everyone would refuse to make use of their 'free' services. Same with Facebook, who is now even involved in old-school stock market manipulations. The problem here is the lack of true alternatives. We are to blame here. We need to think up new models of public infrastructures that are not owned and controlled by the state.

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AM: What about collaboration and peer-to-peer sharing? Do you value them as an asset (I am thinking here of Yochai Benkler's theories) and where are they leading us? In journalism, for example, what is the faith of "citizen-journalism"? Do you think participation is enabled by the new media? I'm thinking about Wikileaks and the new whistle-blowing phenomena.

GL: I support peer to peer networking and in particular the work of Michel Bauwens and his P2P foundation. However, I have to say that we are dealing here with an actual utopia, this means that it is a mass practice which under the acute threat of being banned. Peer to peer might ideally be a super capitalistic model but the matter of the fact is that it is very subversive at the same time. Confusing, no? Collaboration on the other hand is a neutral activity. In an individualistic society like ours it is not a value that is particularly appreciated by authorities (think of anonymous group work) but it is not subversive either. Software such as wiki and online services such as Google doc (the former Writely) are really nice to work with.

I don't think of Wikileaks as best practice in terms of collaboration. Julian Assange is impossible to work with, he cannot delegate, many say. Too bad for such an interesting project. It would be great if a Wikileaks 2.0 would come into being without his celebrity-driven impulses that would further explore online facilitation for whistle-blowers. The challenge that Wikileaks renegates at Openleaks have put themselves is out there and I am very curious to see if and when they are going live with their uploading site. Of course Anonymous is another model but I am concerned about their lack of security awareness—I wonder how many ordinary whistle-blowers would like to submit their sensitive material to groups such as Anonymous. In this context we need to make a sharp distinction between the passive facilitation and the active gesture of hacking. Maybe it is not good to mix them up.

AM: Do you define yourself optimistic or pessimistic about the future? And about the present?

GL: I can see that my generation has less possibilities, and access to resources, in comparison to the post-war or so-called 1968 generation who are now retiring. In Africa and Asia this is another case. Just think of new middle classes in India and Brazil. I am not pessimistic for them. Even the fast-growing middle class in Africa. That's exciting.