

Interview with Geert Lovink by Elisabetta Demaris (Volontari per lo Sviluppo, Italy)

ED: Nowadays social networks like Twitter and Facebook are celebrated as a participation medium that empower the common people to create information, becoming themselves citizen journalists. This fact is seen positively, giving the ordinary people the chance to report and discuss problems related to justice and society. What do you think about it?

GL: It is empowerment without consequences. Most social media users don't talk about political problems on these sites. I would say people do not 'report' on Facebook as it is not a public forum or medium. It's a digital cage. At best they update others they know over what happened. The critique of social media says that they are so limiting because of their 'walled garden' architecture. They are centralized whereas the potential of the internet is lying in its decentralized yet open possibilities. If the Internet as an overall infrastructure was already a closed chapters not so many people wouldn't bother and spend their time and energy on other, more important issues. The social media as we know them right now are not very intelligent tools for organizing and do not seem to be interested to develop further in that direction. Instead it is all about monetizing private data and firing targeted advertisement on users. Social networking is reduced to backroom gossiping and self-promoting. That's nice and sometimes important (and of course all too human) but limiting the potential of digital networked media. Why limit the social? The reduction on Facebook of all forms of social relationships to the 'friend' status on is the classic example. Another would be the persistent refusal of Facebook to install a 'dislike' button (the history of that continuing uproar of users has yet to be written). A variation of that would be the 'don't want' button, 'boring' and 'bullshit' buttons (or 'nonsense' for that matter).

ED: Being the most used mass media today, the social networks give a good chance to no profit organisations too, promoting themselves and creating a follower community. Don't you think it is a great opportunity for these organisations that work for a global public good and that don't gain money except from their follower?

GL: I am sorry but radio, TV and print are still the most used mass media today, even in the USA, let alone in other countries. Social media are, at best, invisible updating networks that can never come up with background details of stories and properly debate complicated matters as they were not

designed to do so in the first place. Twitter is a minority channel (and in my opinion functions well as long as it remains more or less flat and does not fall back into 'broadcasting' mode). Think of the 5 billion mobile phone users in the world. Twitter would be 10% of that, Facebook 20% (and these are optimistic figures). Considerable but not the standard. The fact that in authoritarian countries people use internet functions as an alternative source of information is no doubt true but social media are always speeding up and aggregating the counter/subcultural sources, and not the source itself. Those are blogs, websites, places like YouTube and Vimeo and of course the web presence of the large 'official' news organizations such as the BBC and The New York Times (but I do not trust them for political reasons).

ED: If you think that Facebook and Twitter can not produce social impact, how a real change can happen in a digital era were we are living in?

GL: I never said that these particular US-American platforms lack social impact. They do. But maybe it is not what I have in mind, and what lots of people would want to see happening, on the long-term. Their version of the social for me is a cheap simulation. We try to keep up with the status updates but what do we get done? OK, you know what your so-called friends are up to. They might live across Italy, Europe or the world, and then what? Do you get together? Party? Conspire a revolt or a revolution? I doubt. It's the tyranny of the informal. The South of Italy at it worst. The internet was made for change. Remember, that was the promise of 1990s and beyond. There is the promise to organize media, work and income in a different way. Open and distributed, not through such closed and controlled communication platforms. We need to break through the barrier of informal information. I don't want to upset Twitter and Facebook users. They are neither stupid nor ignorant. The aim of the [Unlike Us](#) network is not to promote some better, politically correct software. What we would like to organize is a public debate about network architectures.