By Geert Lovink

On September 10 2015, a film documentary on the 'smart city' premiered in Amsterdam. The film was made by the Dutch antropologist Dorien Zandbergen, in collaboration with film maker Sara Blom. Dorien interviewed me for the film but the footage somehow didn't make it into the film. Whatever. Dorien invited me to come to Pakhuis de Zwijger to see the result, so I attented the crowded event. I was curious to see how they managed to visualize this trendy topic. The one hour video documentary, available online in both Dutch and English, follows a group of people in Amsterdam who respond to a call to participate in a trail for a self-measurement experiment in which citizens were asked to monitor their own environmental data. We see all of them struggle with the technology, see politicians promote the 'creative' city and hear how Chamber of Commerce officials explain the commercial dimension of such 'grass roots' activities.

The film is ambivalent about the overall tendency. Why should citizen be involved in an effort which is clearly a task of democratic institutions that have the task to improve our lives and have a public obligation to monitor—and ultimately improve—the quality of our lives? Why do multinationals need 'citizen involvement' in the first place? Why can't these 'citizen awareness platforms' (as they are called in Brussels jargon) be truely autonomous and run like self-organised initiatives that are initiated and controlled by social movement that know what the real issues are, and why they collect data in the first place? The top-down 'smart city' discourse is, in the end, a neo-liberal scheme that lacks any legitimacy unless it can show off with a participation simulacrum. To my taste, the film fails to take a clear stand in these issues. Why should we collect data for Google, Facebook, IBM or Cisco? In the case of local air pollution, we don't need to discuss the urgency, but the 'smart city' tech apparatus that is currently being put in place, clearly leaves open the political issue of agency.

After the public debate during the premiere of the film, I felt the need to discuss these issues with the film makers and had an email exchange with Dorien.

Geert Lovink: The film is ambivalent about the 'smart city' discourse. You use the term paradox. How come? Why is it difficult to take a clear stand in this case and show what's the agenda of big technology companies in this, and why city administrators, and ultimately also the cultural sector, hackers and other 'civil society' players are being complicit in this?

Dorien Zandbergen: The smart citizens experiment (the Smart Citizens Kit project (or SCK) that we followed for the film was not the initiative of a multinational corporate entity—it was a project of the Waag Society in Amsterdam. This organization is known for its roots in the hacker scenes of Amsterdam, and it has situated itself in the Smart City debate through its promise to offer an alternative to top-down Smart City making: by giving data-gathering tools into the hands of citizens themselves. In doing so, in addition, it is also trying to open up this subversive hacker spirit to people outside of social movements and autonomous hacker scenes – something that I think is valid and worthwhile.

Given this context, the film is part of my own quest to find a meaningful and relevant critical ground to stand on in the context of the increasing corporate-driven datafication of society, and in the context of a hacker/maker-scene that borrows from a long and rich hacker tradition that foregrounds individual agency and autonomy vis-a-vis digital tech. Having worked at XS4ALL in 1997 and having been involved in multiple projects focused on the education of both myself and others on digital infrastructures, I am sympathetic to this hacker approach. I am very interested in alternative technological politics, and I am definitely willing to explore the extent to which this hacker mentality can become part of a broader societal attitude vis-a-vis digital technology.

The question that opens the film then, is "can we all be hackers? Is that really a promising avenue towards making people genuinely empowered in a digital society? And if so, what does that mean exactly? Does it mean being able to use smart tech to monitor your environment even if you may not be able to open up that technology and see its code? Even if you don't really know how to make sense of the data? Even if this practice may lead to individualistic responsibilization (we all become personally and individually responsible for the understanding and improvement of our environment) and alienates people who are not at ease with these new forms of deliberation, or who simply don't see the point of it?

Another pressing question that I wanted to explore with this film was whether projects like this can really create an alternative to corporate Smart City creation. A partial answer to this is given by the fact, as you point out and as we showed, that the Smart Citizens Kit project was feeding into and fed by the more top-down, international, corporate and institutionalized call for Smart City creation. In one scene we see how, at a Smart City event

organized at the Amsterdam arena by and for corporate and government organizations, the Waag project is presented as a best practice example of a Smart City built by its citizens – even though the project wasn't working out for many of the participants because of bad sensors; and even though it was a project in which only a small group of privileged people participated. At the same time, the project did make non-tech people think about data creation, meaning-making, and local politics, and may even have made people more sceptic regarding the objectivity of data in general.

The film wants to show the complex reality of a Smart City in which the hacker-like emphasis on digital empowerment is employed by people and institutions with many different aims and objectives, often having opposing views on how the ideal Smart City should look like. This phenomenon, I believe, cannot merely be understood in the dichotomous terms of co-optation. It is indicative of an institutional reality in which different entities with different interests and objectives are more and more (encouraged to) collaborate, more and more entwined, linked up and connected, not in the last place by digital technologies themselves. What does it mean in this context to really meaningfully subvert corporate commodification of life through tech?

I also wanted to challenge the digital solutionism that is present both in some hacker scenes and in corporate tech scenes: By also zooming in on the lives of people who are very much outside of the digital 'frontiers'. This may also simply mean fighting for a society that keeps people in their jobs, as guards, cleaners, nurses—rather than by handing over those responsibilities to smart technologies. It may also mean considering the use of non-digital tools that are better equipped to address certain problems than digital ones. Often Smart Citiy/Citizens projects begin with the solution – digital tech – and forget about possible alternatives that may work better. In this project, Waag Society could for instance have more seriously addressed the genuine air-quality related concerns of citizens by taking this problem – air pollution – as the start of its project, and not the solution – the Smart Citizen Kit: as became apparent later in the project, they could have collaborated with the Community Health Services (GGD) in using non-digital technologies—palmes tubes—that are better equipped to reliably measure air quality.

Had I a-priori adopted a dismissive stance vis-a-vis Smart City projects as a corporate marketing story in the film, it would have been harder to openly and broadly explore such questions of governance, authority, subversion and

solidarity against the background of today's digital society.

GL: How do you see the role of the researcher in the technology-driven 'citizen data' experiments as you've covered in your film?

DZ: In the context of the field of citizen data experimentation or citizen science, whatever you name it, many practices are framed through the discourse of research or experimentation: setting up a lab, building tools citizens can use for data-gathering, aggregating the data, visualizing it, etc. As an ethnographer of this phenomenon, however, I tried to stake out another position from which to do research, by looking at the larger political, institutional and socioeconomic context of these practices and particularly of the particular belief in citizen empowerment that is central to these practices. One of the goals of this was to make explicit some of the institutional, socioeconomic and technological assumptions these settings depend on. For instance the assumption that more data leads to power for the data producer, that such experimental settings are autonomous, and that practices of digital empowerment will eventually trickle down, and empower not only the elites embracing it now.

There are many more social scientists like me who try to understand citizen data experimentation in this more critical, contextual way. But in addition to merely criticizing, I would like to be involved in a constructive, interventionist, public debate with citizen science institutions, citizens, critical engineers, policy makers, etc. about the question how we can safeguard democratic principles in more meaningful ways given the technological, institutional, corporate and socioeconomic conditions of today's global society.

One of the ways I seek to do this is by using Gr1p, a foundation I started with others as a platform through which people and institutions interested in these questions and in cross-disciplinary ways of thinking and working, can find each other.

GL: You told me you had issues to express social criticism in the film itself. How come? Did you feel censored? Is the rigid documentary film genre in the Netherlands somehow limiting us to express ourselves freely?

DZ: I think it had to do with the fact that in this film we did something that goes against the prevailing mood with regards to citizen-driven data experiments. As happens for instance in many of the documentaries made by

the Dutch television program Tegenlicht, we constantly read, hear and see the recurring story of the empowered citizen who rises up against dominant institutions by taking tools, initiatives and scientific knowledge into her own hand. People involved in the film told me they had expected us to make just that argument in following the Smart Citizen Kit trajectory.

Instead, however, of taking its own narrative of being an alternative to top-down Smart City making at face value, we used the SCK initiative as a lens to distill, juxtapose and compare many different perspectives, visions and experiences with Smart City thinking of quite a few different people, situated in different lifeworlds (German: Lebenswelten). We wanted to show this way that it is not at all self-evident for everyone that digital self-empowerment is better than institutional forms of governance; that sympathetic initiatives of data-driven citizen empowerment are also implicated by the interests of overarching institutions and corporations, and that there are gaps between the ideal vision of the data-empowered citizen and the daily practices of people struggling with technology – technology which is often not self-explanatory because of its complexity and the way it is protected against scrutiny by means of copyright, DRM software etc.

The difficulty with making this critical point through film lied in the subtlety of my argument, which I am not sure had a place in this film. To be clear, I am all for a world in which individual people have more power vis-a-vis corporations and government institutions. Yet, I don't think that in the current corporate-controlled digital society, and given current socio-economic differences, a genuinely inclusive and fair digital society is not going to be achieved by giving individual people digital tools for self-regulating their environment.

GL: The Netherlands is known to be a straight-forward anti-intellectual culture. Don't express yourself in difficult sentences. Do not make references to authors. Do not presume your audience knows anything. Did that bother you in the making of the film?

DZ: Indeed, it is a wide spread notion that academic thought in and of itself doesn't lend itself for public presentation without the intervention of a medium or style that is, presumably, more engaging or 'accessible' to this public. The way in which I framed this project to the funders, in fact, reproduced this idea: in the funding applications I explained my decision to explore the medium of film as an attempt to broker academic insights to a broader audience. This way of framing it was effective, and may have been

one of the reasons it got funded.

Also after funding, the role that could be played by academic discourse in the film was subject to constant negotiation between myself and the co-producer. As a filmmaker she prefers the style of observational cinema, in which the footage tells the story "by itself". To make the film 'engaging' she then encouraged me not to be too intellectual, not to explain too much, not even to use voice-over. However, I didn't believe that observational cinema was the right style to use for this particular story. At the same time, perhaps due to this anti-intellectual culture, I also had to acknowledge that a lot of people would probably dissociate from the story when framed by too much intellectual discourse. So, we ended up with a compromise, which we both think works pretty well.

Watch the documentary here:
http://gr1p.org/en/documentary-smart-city-in-search-of-the-smart-citizen/
More on the gr1p foundation: http://gr1p.org/en/over-ons/
Dorien Zandbergen's personal webpage: http://dorienzandbergen.nl/