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Operating Systems for the Metamorphoses

Interview with Geert Lovink

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By Benedetto Vecchi and Teresa Numerico

Q: Recently, it's been impossible to avoid the conflict between Apple and FBI, after the request from the latter to create software with the intent to bypass iPhone protection. With the determination of a media activist, the offended Tim Cook refused the request of the FBI, in the name of the unalienable and universal right to privacy. On his side, there are most of the important companies of the network. The irony is that Apple uses proprietary software and looks at the multifarious world of open source with disdain. What can we say of the fact that Google, Facebook Amazon—leaders in the area of making money out of personal profile data—are now the most convinced freedom defenders against the state interference, after collaborating for years in developing surveillance technologies on the network. What do you think of such a complicated and ambivalent situation?

A: We should thank Assange, Anonymous, Snowden and the thousands of less visible cyber-rights activists that expose the close collaborations between NSA and the 'stacks', as Bruce Sterling calls the big American IT/internet players. The fact that Apple now stands up is due to this massive pressure from society over the past years and decades. And protests coming from inside the industry itself—including their own workers. People do care about their privacy and have broken the Silicon Valley social contract, which stated that users get services for free in exchange for their personal data. We're no longer in the care-free society of 2007. So far so good. What we should discuss is how slow the issues trigger down these days. Why is it so hard for us to scale up? Everything speeds up, except our resistance. Occupy happened 3-4 years after the financial meltdown. How many decades did it take to build up the massive pressure at the Paris climate summit of December 2015?

We live under a real-time media regime. We can communicate instantaneously with everyone around the globe, for almost no cost. Memes spread at the speed of light. Why can't social movements emerge in a similar fashion? This is the demand 'accelerationism' makes, and I fully support it.

We need to move away from sharing and responding and design new forms of organization that are not just decentralized, inclusive and democratic, but also up to speed: from a discursive to a coordination network. This is for me the political dimension of the logistical turn in the humanities (from Keller Easterling, Alan Liu to John Durham Peters and many others). This shift goes further than the classic 'what's to be done' question. For instance, we are nearly three years into the Snowden case and 1% of his documents have become available in the public domain. How come? It is charming to celebrate the (Italian) slow food movement and promote sustainable information digestion but I sincerely worry when urgent matters are on the table. Are we, for instance, quick enough in our solidarity with the refugees? The problem here is that the internal clock of our social body is, still, not adjusted to the real-time potentials of the computer networks.

Q: Since August 2012 Julian Assange has been forced to hide inside the walls of the Ecuadorian embassy in London. He is a controversial person, for sure, however the founder of Wikileaks is undoubtedly the personality who gave a glamour face to a certain version of the hacker attitude. He is the sponsor of the idea that information wants and has to be free. Can you explain the dialectics between the global echo of Wikileaks and the relevant tendency to control communication activities?

A: You are probably aware that I am one of the few Assange critics that come from the same circles. It is important to support his case and become part of the investigative work on the thousands, if not millions of documents that Wikileaks and others such as Cryptome have so far published. However, I do not share Assange's celebrity approach and conspiratorial worldview (which, in my view, are related). In comparison to NGOs and social movements across the globe, the Assange work ethic has been disastrous. There are a lot of elements from hacker culture that we should openly reject and criticize. We should not create and adore our martyrs. In the same way we should demand from Assange that he stops calling himself 'editor-in-chief' (as if he running some media organization) and accept that his supporters work in collective structures. I cannot put these concerns on the side and see them somehow secondary to the 'important' political work exposing the global elites and their secret services. Wikileaks does not exist without the grass roots work of the cyber multitudes. His obsession with global news outlets such as The Guardian and the New York Times is counter-productive. Because of the personality-driven approach of Wikileaks we're only using a small percentage of the potential that is out there to actually do something

with all these amazing and shocking documents. Few weeks ago, at Transmediale in Berlin, I attended the very first meeting of Snowden archivists, organized by Berliner Gazette. There is such a huge backlog that I sometimes wish we had a global moratorium on scandals!

To return to your question, when it comes to radical transparency, I fully support Asante. Conservative thinkers in Germany (Bul Chul-Han) and the Netherlands (Paul Frissen) in which transparency of NSA and Wikileaks are judged as one and the same. I disagree with such an analysis. Most hackers are careful and precise in what they publicize. A lot of their effort are focused on the protection of the privacy of individual users (as much as this is possible), for instance through the promotion of Adblocker, the Tor browser and PGP for email. Even more inspiring are the campaigns to warn against (inevitable) security breaches inside voting machines. Also think of the current debates, with implications for all of us, about the secretive TTIP talks, and why it is our interest to make these trade negotiations accessible. Or think of the Democracy in Europe movement, initiated by Yanis Varoufakis, which started off with the demand to open up the Eurogroup meetings. These are all specific demands that cannot be reduced to some cynical demand that 'everything has to be transparent'.

Q: In the area of network culture it was taken for granted that the network did not take borders into account. Nowadays we witness a 'balkanization' of the network. Borders start to get established. Is there a sunset of the idea of the network as a global medium? Do we see a redesign of economic, social and political hierarchies, as is happening offline?

A: Networks are not just infrastructure or protocols, they are organizational forms. Networks shape the social. At least, until recent. In my latest book Social Media Abyss I state, together with many others, that the dominant form these days is not the Castells' network society but platform capitalism. Networks still exist but they are sub-forms that run underneath or inside the platform and lack autonomy. This tendency may look like an opposite development from the one you sketch. Of course there is geo-blocking, the walled gardens of Facebook and the Chinese Firewall. But our own networks are overruled not because of some fragmentation but because of an incredible process of centralization of software and infrastructure. They suffer from hyper-growth and inflation. But there is hope! Networks can return at any time, and funny enough will regain their utopian energies shortly (which they arguably lost in the dotcom days of the late nineties).

This is what my dear Sydney friend Ned Rossiter and I have working on for quite some time: the proposal of organized networks that are capable of technological sovereignty. The informal structure of networks have the future precisely because old social signifiers such the family, the church and the party not longer appeal to the majority of the population. This is why we should not write off the network too soon and search for structures in which they thrive and remain independent.

Q: In your reflection internet once had a laboratory capacity, anticipating and defining transformations, which got later taken over by capitalism. Is this still the case, considering the prominence of big data and social media? What does it mean when we say that the network is now integrated within the capitalistic system?

A: The fight over network architecture is the big struggle of our time. There is a lot at stake, both for civil society, governments and business. These three have conflicting interests. For a long time the post-cold war 'internet governance' consensus ruled. After Snowden, the engineering bureaucracy lost its grip on developments, symbolized in 'the internet is broken' phrase. The question is who the new players will be. When will intellectuals, artists and politicians with a thorough technical expertise finally take centre stage? Google and Facebook and few others are becoming more and more powerful. The current statistics are depressing. Is this the internet that we were fighting for?

Q: In recent years, activists and theorists considered 'sharing' a magical concept that could somehow run parallel to the real existing capitalism. In this idea sharing embodied an exodus from capitalism via the development of cooperative enterprises, a network of businesses that worked according to a non-capitalistic logic. Fast forward and the sharing economy is considered the very core the contemporary capitalist enterprise... What do you make of this shift?

A: At first we would say that this a classic case of capitalist appropriation. For me, sharing is something special, it's a gift, connected to a ritual. Sharing is by no means something automated or cold. It is the precise opposite of the business transaction. I never got it what Uber or Airbnb were 'sharing' (certainly not their profit, or losses for that matter). The problem occurred because we have been neglecting the role of the new intermediates: the internet ideology emphasizes the 'disruption' of the old ones, but remains silent over the new ones. [Evgene Morozov](#) and others

recently emphasized the ‘rent extraction’ aspect. Please follow how [Pando Daily](#) is reporting about all this from San Francisco. To formulate it bluntly, Uber and the rest are the new parasites that do not add anything productively to the economy. Uber is not buying new cars and Airbnb is not building new apartments. In many countries they even tried the argument that they did not have to pay added value tax and income tax because they were not a business.

Q: For the ‘sharing economy’ the connection between innovation and jobs’ precariousness is normal. How is it possible to break this connection that devalues both cognitive and manual work? How can we loosen the strong bonds between research in the name of ‘innovation’ and the existent structures that are dominated by the short-term profit logic?

A: Building the commons together would be the short answer. What we need to do to bring together the positive building of new initiative when the popular defense of its old forms such as public health, public libraries, public parks and beaches, public schools and universities and so on. It is important in terms of coalition building to bring the two together, and go in the offense, also when we protest the take-over of public infrastructure. Demand an immediate moratorium on the sell out of public housing and bring that together with the Airbnb debates in your area and join new forms of (hybrid) civic engagement on a local level. This includes the internet itself. We need to take back the public infrastructure that was taken away from us. Stop using gmail and demand the local servers back that were decommissioned a while ago. And if you need inspiration, go and find the positive examples on websites such as <http://p2pfoundation.net/>.

Q: In your reflections you always look for a connection between network culture and its political uses. Our feeling is that the political use of the network structure is now a fact. There are dozens of political experiences in which the network was not only a communication medium but also an organization model. Yet, this accumulation of experiences does not result in an accumulation of power. How do you read the viral diffusion of media activism often characterized by a short life cycle, incapable of political continuity?

A: Networks tend to deconstruct power and slowly but steadily take apart centralist tendencies. That’s the real existing anarchism no one notices. David Graeber embraces it while leninists like Zizek question it. In my work I give this century old debate a technological grounding. We need to

understand that computers will not maintain networks. These machines are our assistants. There is no way one can outsource, let alone automate the hard task of organizing human beings. What can save us is the Event. Yes, in capital letters. It is events that create strong ties. Do stuff. Get together and commit an act of beauty. This is not a call for blind activism. A year ago I was in the lucky position to get involved in [Rethink UvA](#), one of the groups that were involved in the University of Amsterdam occupation. The protest lasted two months and resulted in a strong network of staff that otherwise never would have gotten together. The internet will not be the catalyst we're looking for. Events, caused by small groups, set politics and solidarity in motion and then larger mobilizations can happen, in which the internet, no doubt, plays a crucial role.

Q: Do you think that anonymous practices can have a role in the reorganization of network politics? And if so, do you think that it can overcome the risks of an anarchic rebellion?

A: I never questioned the value of the rebellion, no matter how hopeless they may be. Uprisings are important energy sources for the self-organization of the everyday life, which so easily slips back into a routine. Protests are collective reminders why we build up and maintain collectives, why we defend public infrastructure. Anonymity is an enabler, not a goal. It is a defensive response in a time of total surveillance. It would be much better to go in the offensive, openly, together, overcoming our fears, but these days that's not always possible. We need to respect that. We all know that anonymity is a gesture, a mask that we wear during the rite de passage from one stage to the next. There is no such thing as absolute anonymity. The protection is always temporary and may not work. The code can and will be cracked over time. These technical insights should humble us and warn us, but never stop us to take necessary protective measures. Encryption is a public and political gesture, and not an ideal way to save your ass.

Q: In your bio you describe yourself as an internet critic. Can you explain us how is it possible to found the critical attitude, considering that we cannot accept a foundationalist or an essentialist positioning?

A: My understanding of a critic is a professional and institutional one. In the early 1990s my reasoning was a fairly simple one—beyond all the justified deconstructions of critique. If there are film critics, theater critics and book reviewers, why not also take it serious to critically assess websites? Are they less vital to our cultural life? Too marginal? Not worth the reflection?



Criticism is a rich and noble literary genre. Ever since media theory we know about the multiplicity of material carriers. Why is internet suddenly not part of this? Is this because the dominance of geeks and entrepreneurs in this field? Is it because of the withdrawal of the humanities? 25 years later we're still struggling to fully take the internet serious and do not know where to position this 'meta' medium. Criticism is not skepticism. Without a serious reflection the industry is caught in its own myths and marketing phrases. Film developed its own language, and the following generations of directors and camera operators benefited from this. Why can't this also be the case with internet?

We go to university and study film or theater but seek in vain for the internet department. Is this because no one is using the Net? This is by no means an Italian or European situation. I am calling for a systematic approach here. The multi-disciplinary approaches of the main players certainly has worked against us. What, at first glance, looks like a cute method that includes design, political economy, visual arts and code works against us in the long term on an institutional level. Everything's in flux, it all comes and goes so fast that we cannot build up institutional memories. The resistance of the baby boom generation (who are still in charge) comes on top of that. This only really benefit the large players, not citizens, NGOs or small local businesses. This leads to conclusion that internet is indeed only an economic factor (yet wildly neglected inside the economics faculties).

Q: You seem to believe in a redesign of digital sensibility. Could you tell us the strategy that you think we need to use to succeed in such a difficult task?

A: Let's not portrayal technology as difficult, it's fun, at least when do it together, in hacker spaces, privacy cafes, maker labs and so on. Sensibility starts with the 'Latourian' strategy of making things visible. One of the most urgent things to do right now would be open up our smart phones and tablets, start mass awareness campaigns how the app economy functions, how filters and algorithms works. Coding classes and courses are necessary on all levels. In the past years we've witnessed a massive deskilling of the (working) population, mainly thanks to 'social media'. In the classes I give on the masters level, students no longer even know the simple blog software WordPress or HTML and present their Facebook pages as their only online presence. And they are supposed to be emerging professionals. And these are 'digital natives'. In the end, they only know how to navigate the corporate platforms with little or no understanding what's going on behind

the smooth interfaces.

Q: How is it possible to avoid the temptation of resentment against the bad habits involved in the massive use of communication technologies, keeping the critical spirit, spreading awareness of the social and political consequences of platform capitalism?

A: By practicing the art of metamorphosis. We need to reinvent ourselves every now and then and not dig into existing positions. How can we dismantle resentment? This is the big challenge of our times, for Europe and the West. It is not enough to insist on political correctness. We need to establish new encounters. I am aware that this is a Christian motive. Maybe computers are Christian machines, after all. Umberto Eco was right in his distinction between Mac as a Catholic and Windows as a Protestant interface designs. But both of them are Christian operating systems. Networks connect, they create community. Let's emphasize that in these desperate, nihilist times.