

Interview for La Repubblica with Geert Lovink

By Valeria Strambi

Interview conducted for the Social Media Abyss book launch at the Internet Festival in Pisa (6-8 October 2016).

Valeria Strambi: The title of your last book is “Social Media Abyss”: why abyss? It means that when you are captured by the net, is it impossible to be released?

Geert Lovink: Indeed. We are talking about a new form of addiction. Just observe how people can't stand in an elevator without having to check their phone. There is a strong bodily habit developing, which has not yet been studied enough. Persuasive design has made it all but impossible to get bored.

There is so much evidence for the strong force of the abyss. These are not a shocking observations, I suppose. Around 5-10 years ago we still thought that one service would be followed by the next (after MySpace, Facebook etc.). This has been my assumption as well—and I was wrong. At first it was said that it was the critical mass, the network effect, that made it hard to delete your Facebook account. Then it was social pressure. Now research claims that it is the unconscious manipulation through continuous tests on the user base that makes it harder and harder to log off.

VS: How do you imagine social networks of the future? We started with a simple chat, then came Facebook, Whatsapp, Snapchat...

GL: We should not isolate the innovation and marketing sequence of the platform monopolies from the wider context. In Italy many people mix up social media and social networks. Elsewhere people have forgotten about the networks, for the right reasons. Networks and media are not one and the same. As long as we live in tribes there have been complex social relationships, hierarchies, and networks. This is the domain of sociology and anthropology. In the golden days of sociological discipline, social network analysis was developed. When computers started to shrink and got connected, in that same decade, the term networks started to get a socio-technological dimension, ending up in the social media era we live in.

These days we can no longer distinguish between technology and the social.

So, if I have answer your question, it is important to ask: why not refer to 'social question' and the self-organization? The next killer app doesn't matter. We need to discuss new family ties, the politics of gender and race, the rise of informal relations and economies. Software is now shaping our social relations. These are not innocent tools. We're not passive consumers. We, as Europeans, need to ask the question: how do we want to shape the social? There is no 'national' solution at this level. What's community today? Will these apps facilitate collaboration and dialogue or conflict? Will it connect us to the local or rather some abstract space elsewhere? Is the social talking to bots? Will these apps provide jobs for us or only distract us from the real question that Italy is facing?

VS: Could monetization through crowdfunding contribute to a redistribution of wealth or further widen the gap between rich and poor?

GL: Crowdfunding is one of the many answers from below in response to the 2008 global financial crisis that happened in parallel with the democratization of internet and rise of social media. Crowdfunding has a long history. These days, such collective efforts to raise funds for projects are so much more easy to realize (however, do not underestimate the time it costs to get there!). I see such efforts not as solutions to the widening gap between rich and poor, but as temporary tools, used inside larger campaigns that aim for real change. Neo-liberalism is causing poverty everywhere. However, it is useless for many of us to just sit back and wait for an overall revolution. We need to experiment with new (revenue) models. That's why 'labs' are so popular these days. Artists, designers, performers need to be able to earn a living wage from their creative ventures. If that's not possible, then we aim for a universal basic income. All these are topics we discuss at our MoneyLab events and online debates.

VS: To what extent is our freedom limited by the internet? Is it still possible to remain outside social media and preserve some privacy?

GL: Beneath the platform lies the beach. reclaim your friendships from Facebook. The aim of our net criticism is to unearth and question technological parameters of devices and apps we use but barely understand how they function. It is easy to prove that the internet is limiting us and that there is no real freedom of speech. Retrospectively, we are all repressed and caged into the narrow Zeitgeist of our time. I don't buy this rhetoric. I don't like such a cynical point of view and emphasize the imaginative side when we explore the negative pole. The aim of criticism is open up situations in

such a way that new things can happen. Positive marketing spin will only try to convince you that everything is fine, nothing will be going wrong and that everything has been taking care off.

I am not advocating a happy offline life without computers. Right now we're all forced in the direction of 'self mastery' through daily training, a moralistic top-down policy of self-restraint, mixed with technological awareness that borders to mass paranoia. The only long-term answer here is to relax together. We can only do that after the dismantling of Facebook and Google and their 'economy of the free', which gives us no other option but to trade our privacy for free access. Luckily alternative models are now within reach. Turn the monopoly platforms into user-owned cooperatives. This is what Trebor Scholz and others argue for. There is now the opportunity for all of us users to buy Twitter. This is a serious proposition that many look into. Same with Uber and Airbnb, that should be owned by the drivers and house owners that make use of such services.

VS: Which are the risks and the opportunities of social media?

GL: There are reports about privacy violations that appear on a daily basis. We don't need to list them here. We're now reaching a point where we do not need more evidence about the strategy of the NSA and other secret services, the systematic sales of our most intimate data by Google, Facebook and other to third parties. What we need now is a common strategy to dismantle these structures. Adblock and other filter services are a good start. They are proving to be amazingly successful and annoy the online advertisement industry. But what we should really be doing is implement subscription models that are combined with enough crypto to make it safe again to have a normal online conversation again. We need to create new places in the shade. But we can only create them after we've launched a big offensive, also in the European context, against the massive and systematic data breaches.

VS: Which is the correct use of social networks? It makes sense to build some sort of a manual.

GL: Manuals are good for short-term awareness. Let's write them and distribute them, teach about this topic in school, and create mass awareness. Privacy manuals are only useful if they give an insight in the workings of the algorithms and trackers and explain the political and economic agendas behind of this of the major players. Online literacy is only effective if it is

part of a larger (European) social movement. Don't think you've done enough just because you've installed ad blockers, Tor and PGP.

VS: Is it true that social media give you the opportunity to create a new life and present yourself in a different way? Has lying become easier in a time when the net reveals the most intimate parts of our life?

GL: To create a fake identity on social media is hard. You can and will be traced back to your 'real' location, Smart phones make it next to impossible to use them anonymously. There are your typing mistakes, use of language and patterns in one's typing behavior that reveal your ID. That's the tragedy of today's transparent life. Mark Zuckerberg is to a large extent to blame for this (amongst others, of course). Instructed by the NSA he is still on a crusade against second identities. Historically, even Google has been more ambivalent. It is no longer possible to build up a parallel identity online. This is remarkable because large platforms like Wikipedia are still based on the opposite assumption. The early internet mythology was based on this notion that we had to be liberated from our 'real' identities. It's still the dominant way young people play games.

Let's not get depressed. It is possible to take the toys away from the boys and disarm Silicon Valley. Remember, before 1989 it was inconceivable to imagine a world after the Cold War. The Berlin Wall would never come down. We just have to get organized, increase the pressure and let the baroque powers of the billionaires decay. A phenomenal stock market crash could evaporate all their assets in a matter of days. Internet infrastructures will not survive a world war, in particularly not the silly social media. Other people speculate about an electromagnetic impulse that will wipe out all data. I am referring to these type of upheavals because 'social media' will not go away by themselves. The addiction has become too high for something like that to happen. Dissidents will escape in time. Become one of them.