

Interview with Geert Lovink by [Remo Bassetti](#) (Italian translation [here](#))

Remo Bassetti: It seems that the study of internet and social media hasn't achieved much success until now. Surprising nothingness, if we think about the levels critical theory of media has reached. Do you share this opinion? Maybe there is a demand for a larger scope and more interdisciplinarity?

Geert Lovink: I am ashamed about my own inability to scale up and operate on the level of, let's say, Naomi Klein. What fails in our context is a social movement in which tech critique can thrive (comparable to feminism, labor movement, ecology), that could support such a professional approach. We're stuck in ghettos, yes, self-designed, and sometimes comfortable ones, without proper knowledge how to reach wider audiences. The urgency is there, no doubt. Let's go practice some critique as self-immolation, as I can't answer your question without taking my own role into account. I agree that the 'net criticism' project we started more than 20 years ago hasn't gone anywhere much.

We can't leave it to the historians either to explain this fact as there won't be many interested in the question in the first place. You rightly raise the issue of an absent object, a missed opportunity. When the internet became mainstream we were in the midst of a brutal neo-liberal wave. There was a consensus among geeks, entrepreneurs and the media traditional sector that the internet did not need a serious critique. All had different agendas but the belief about the obsolescence of criticism was widely shared.

There was, and still is, no revenue model available. How's the tech critic going to make a living? Do start-ups provide residencies? Do art institutions support young net critics? Of course not. Many would say: you will have to be an academic, that's your destiny. But that's not even the case in traditional fields such as literature, theatre or even film. Disciplines such as philosophy or sociology, cultural studies, art history or literature could have taken up the job, but that did not happen. For a variety of reasons they felt threatened by the internet and digitization in general. This prevented them to fully embrace the field. Right now it's too late. Of course it is never too late for young people to enter the field but they will have to start from scratch in a time when there is little time and resources for systematic reflection. However, I remain optimistic. Perhaps a next economic crisis will produce a fantastic generation of young thinkers that are not hooked on social media, rebel and overcome the real existing problems of distraction and start to work on serious alternatives—and their underlying critical

concepts.

RB: Compared to previous media, is the web merely a short saga? Or are there continuous elements we should pay attention to?

GL: This would be an ideal question for Marshall McLuhan. Lately, I tend to think that we should look at the internet as meta infrastructure that incorporates the media sphere, but cannot be reduced to it. In the 1990s we were mistaken to call these emerging technologies 'new media'. Maybe mistake is too strong a word. Media were one of the fields in which the calculation devices were going to be deployed. In the everyday life of billions of inhabitants of this planet, it is the media and communication layer that is having the most direct impact on our daily lives. Think of 'social media'. However, there are logistics layers, the coordination of health care, education, traffic and food production that have an equally deep impact on us. All this is coordinated through 'the web'.

RB: In a period where awareness about the backward liberalism crisis stands out, there is a lack of awareness about platforms capitalism, which is an aggressive avant-garde of that same liberalism. Jean Baudrillard said that social media correspond to the depth exasperation of social aspects. As you wrote, Facebook is so famous thanks to its technical and social limitations. But what came first, the chicken or the egg? Are social media meticulous executors of social aspects depth or they are the active agents of this destruction thanks to their type of infrastructures? The same we can ask about web anger. Is Twitter facilitating or creating the anger?

GL: In the past century we depended on writers, journalists and researchers to 'capture' the Zeitgeist and report back to rulers, policy makers and other experts what the mood among the general public was. These days, data on the social 'temperature' are increasingly in the hands of social media monopolies. In turn, they can start to manipulate such strategic knowledge and steer, filter and even create entirely new issues. The chicken and egg problem that you are raising, however, still remains. There is no solution for that—unless you start to subscribe to conspiracy theories. The cybernetic feedback loops are turning around at such a high speed that the unraveling of such chains of information becomes a meticulous undertaken. Such research is crucial independent investigative journalism, and needs to be supported, but also runs the risk of becoming marginal historical evidence. This is our challenge: how to do critical research in the age of real-time communication?

RB: Is there a method to reconnect the Web to its original promises? You talk about organized networks and the renaissance of cooperation. Could you explain these concepts?

GL: Let me start with the latter one. The aspect of (free) cooperation is an ancient one and was already theorized in the 1970s when computer mainframes were connected through the early internet. At the time remote computers were connected to share scarce resources, namely computation time. Immediately, these tasks were coordinated through new layers of electronic communication (email, chat, newsgroups). It's hard not to mention Howard Rheingold here, his work is key. For my context, the story starts with initiatives such as Oekonux, the P2P Foundation and Discordia, which I described in my 2003 book [My First Recession](#). The theory of free cooperation came out of the Discordia group. Trebor Scholz and I organized first an event about it in Buffalo and then brought the ideas together in *The Art of Free Cooperation* (Autonomedia, 2007). An important distinction in this context is between collaboration (in a team, often with a boss), and free cooperation, which is driven by self-organization. A good decade later these ideas have all grown and now operate within the '[platform cooperativism](#)' context.

Organized networks is slightly newer but also dates back ten years ago. I am still working on these ideas together with Ned Rossiter in Sydney. The idea is simple, to counter-balance the scale-free networks that grow exponentially, in all directions, with concise and workable units that respect the Dunbar number (which says that meaningful networks have an ideal size of 100-120 members. We all know that groups function really well when they have around 15 members. Social media these days have walked over these basic insights out of commercial interest and have not compensated its 'users' with tools to facilitate online collaboration.

The method is one of patience, perseverance, trial-and-error, and the belief in the certainty that the world (real or virtual) cannot and will not operate without (critical) world-making concepts. The inspiring art history episode of 1970s conceptual art is inspiring in this context. Someone should write a broader cultural history of the diverse culture of concept development in that period, and link (free) software development with those artistic practices. It is a sad reality that we cannot see the deep links between those creative worlds these days. Let's say there is hope!

RB: Do you think, politically speaking, going for a tendency inversion, that

there is a possibility to disregard Evgene Morozov's call for the "socialisation of data processing centres"?

GL: Disregard? I support it and was thrilled when I read it for the first time, in an interview with him in the [New Left Review](#), in early 2015. It would wild to reread Kevin Kelly's *The Inevitable*, with Evgene Morozov in mind: what's inevitable is the socialization of Google and Facebook. It is the techno-libertarian Silicon Valley enclave that is the exception, one of these perfect historical anomalies (to put it in negative terms, entropy, war, closed nation states and ethnic purity are the rule, globalization is the exception, not the telos). We should prepare to transfer the useful concepts that can be salvaged from the coming tech ruins into the commons. That's one of the possible ways in which Morozov's socialization can be realized. Maybe this will not happen within the current borders of the United States. We can think of contemporary forms of monasteries in which all these experiments, prototypes can be safeguarded in case we're entering a political Dark Age, economic collapse, WorldWar III, climate catastrophe or combination of these elements. The question will remain if the scale of the current global techno-infrastructure can—and will be—maintained. Most likely, these large nodes will disappear, just read this story about the rise and fall of [the world's largest trading floor of USB](#), north of New York City. Centralized planning can go defunct over night, that's the lesson from 1989. Empires can and will crumble, that's the *Inevitable*, Silicon Valley is now facing.