Questions from Luciana Grosso

Luciana Grosso: What's next? What is coming after the social network era? What will arrive after this social-mania, if it will ever end?

Geert Lovink: I do not mind to act like a futurologist but I have to disappoint you: we'll be stuck in this social media age for some time to come. We Europeans failed to develop alternatives. There is no 'market' and we all let it happen: crippling monopolies are a fact, we've locked ourselves in and now we complain. Unless there's going to be a global crisis or war, we will not able to free ourselves from the 'tremendous' addiction to these real-time apps. I have given up that individuals who make the courageous exodus will make a difference. Boredom or dispear won't make a difference either; the physical, social and emotional dependency is already too big. We were naive to think that users would move on, as they did from Geocities to Blogger to Friendster to MySpace. Then it stopped at Facebook. Youngsters migrated to Whatsapp and Instagram, but these are owned by the same old Facebook Corp. and are currently being integrated into the same data empire. What's left is the proposal of a public takeover of platforms (including the datacentre infrastructure). This a political proposal we need to further discuss and put on the table in this year of crucial elections.

For decades European elites deliberately looked away, convinced that the internet was a fad, a fashion that would fade away, and now they have been pushed to the sides. Brussels thought telcos such as Orange and Telefonica, and traditional technology players such as Philips and Siemens would develop alternatives. Nothing happened. Instead, we're using hardware produced in China with services controlled in the United States. Lately Europeans have woken up and have installed austerity-driven neo-liberal 'creative industries' policies that try to foster start-up cultures. Ever since Evgene Morozov we know that techno-solutionism is not the answer. Developing an app is not a solution to overcome platform capitalism. For the social media drama it might already be too late, unless drastic measures are taken that implements anti-trust measures overnight.

LG: In the beginning, Internet was seen as a utopian place where the only rule was 'no rules': everyone was free to say and write and read whatever they wanted. Was this in fact the case at the time?

GL: There is no doubt that 1990s internet culture was more wild. But I am not nostalgic. There were far less users. The user base was homogeneous

and the interfaces and operating systems didn't work very well. These days we're not often confronted anymore with crashing devices. Instead, dysfunctionality has moved to the level of society. The smoothness of today comes with a price. Jaron Lanier often points at the anarchic nature of individual homepages—a far cry from the standardized communication environments of Facebook and Twitter. Why learn Linux or XML anymore as an ordinary user? This overall loss of technical knowledge amongst users has lead to crisis in media literacy. The idea is that we do not need anymore instruction. All platforms are self-evident for a child—and this is what we actually see happening around us. This is also the case of moderation. That's an art form: how to run a community, to overcome differences and structures debates (without policing them). One of the sources of the problem here is the lack of tools to develop communities. Social media are not built for that, on purpose. They are outward-looking with the aim to connect as much data with other data with the aim to sell the profiles to third parties for advertisement purposes. Everyone knows that social media is an alienating echo chamber and fosters narcissism as a necessary act in the struggle for self promotion. In the end, empowerment is not satisfying. We need a cold restart, from scratch, and build peer-to-peer networks that focus on collaboration and discussion, not just on 'news' that 'shared' and commented by 'friends'. This has already been said time and again, but nothing happens. That's how we got stuck. Many feel that way. That's the disillusion of the internet, which is no longer a progressive tool nor a parallel reality but an abyss that takes us down further into a state of inequality, fear and hatred.

LG: How did that happen, a place celebrated for freedom becoming so dark, filled with lies, violence and fascism? Is this jungle what freedom looks like?

GL: I have not lost my belief in freedom and subversion. Let's go back to Erich Fromm's *Fear of Freedom*. There is so much fascinating literature that we can read together. Take Hannah Ahrendt, or Isaiah Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Promote such thinkers and contrast them with the libertarian dogma's of Ayn Rand that is being promoted so much these days. Which freedom do we want? Many of us have second thoughts when it comes to radical openness. We can't deal with the 'open society' and intuitively search for a 'New Order' as Michael Seemann, the Berlin 'Kontrollverlust' blogger and author of *Digital Tailspin*, calls it. What comes after radical transparency? Will we find a new equilibrium after the dust has settled? Do we withdrawal in a new cult of secrecy, as Byung Chul-Han in his

Transparency Society proposes? Will we ever get used to the bright light of over-exposure, to put in terms of Jean Baudrillard? I would love to answer your question in an orthodox psycho-analytical way. Why do we want to punish ourselves after a period of excessive communication and radical freedom? How can we escape this vicious circle of orgy and remorse? Where is the psycho-historian Lloyd deMause, now that we need him? Who updates his epic book on Reagan's America?

LG: Should we be afraid of fake news? Lies and the manipulation of the truth have always been around, ever since the times of Moses. Why is this suddenly a problem?

GL: As you say, fake news has always been core business, it's was once called 'manufacturing consent' or 'public relations'. As Morozov tweets: "Messing with the media, celebrities, facts, etc does not really get in the way of getting the job done – for Trump, it's *the* job." Our problem is the 'authenticity bonus' of direct communication. We do not see the social media managers that operate behind their dashboards (as Douglas Rushkoff teaches us). Why the fake news question did not come earlier has got to do with moment in which social media became mainstream. Until recent, the Net was still looked upon as something unknown and new, at best an additional toy. Experts talked about multi-media as if it was some sort of symphony, a media concert in search for harmony between all the different channels. But the liberal 'multimodality' view of 'remediation' has been blasted away by the directness and real-time of social media.

Now that the introductory period of 'digitization' has come to an end, we are exposed to an unprecedented form of acceleration. In the original idea of networked democracy it was assumed that the multiplicity of channels would lead to a greater diversity of voices. This did not materialize and it would be useful to reconstruct where precisely the process derailed. In classic internet fashion, things move fast, and that will also be the case with the fake news meme itself, which will be overruled by even more spectacular propaganda acts, pseudo-events–and historical tragedies.

LG: Is preventive censorship a solution?

GL: In past weeks we see that the 'perception management' industry is busy figuring out which 'anti-missile missiles' they should invent to calm down the media frenzy. A Minority Report technique to isolate evil behaviour might work on the individual level but is no longer effective once the political

upheaval has already started. Facebook is entirely naive as they still believe in filtering of 'fake news' by temporary consultancy firms such as [Correctiv](#) or [Snopes](#), as if this problem can be solved and will disappear in a few months. There are also fact-checking firms on specific topics such as [Ukraine](#) or [climate change](#). The next step is the 'democratization' of the meme design workshops, 'meme sprints' where multi-disciplinary 'agile' teams of designers, coders and 'trolls' gather to unleash 'meme wars'–and then disappear: organized networks that take the ideas of Adbusters one step further but shy away from the long-term commitment of the work that is done out of [The Agency](#), a presumed 'troll farm' office building in St. Petersburg (see also this [Guardian](#) article). Not far from here is the [NATO observatory](#) in Riga that looks in Russian social media manipulations.

LG: Will our grandchildren read Facebook or The New York Times?

GL: The New York Times, which by then will be owned by Facebook. That would be the Dutch pragmatist answer. The correct one is of course neither of them. The kids will navigate through Uber Entertainment. You must have heard from Alfabet, the mother company of Google, an umbrella structure for mega corporations, which is also likely to happen to Facebook as well. Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, now owns The Washington Post. The new rubber barons are running the largest non-profits in the world (think of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation). Others enter different industries such as space travel. What we need is a new iteration of cyberpunk literature that takes us on a tour through corporate cities owned by Snapchat, Tesla factories that mass manufacture killer robots and the Huawei hacking bunker, a smart internet observatory, masterminded by Chinese hipsters.