

Email Interview on June 22, 2017 with Geert Lovink by Davide Nitrosi, Italian journalist with a group of daily papers such as Bologna's Resto del Carlino, Florence's Nazione and Milan's Giorno.

Davide Nitrosi: Once Twitter was viewed as a tool of liberation. During the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East and the Iran riots before that Twitter was the media of freedom. We thought Internet was against tyranny. Now we see the abuse of social networks. Twitter founder, Evan Williams, said to the [New York Times](#) that Twitter's role in the Trump election was a very bad thing. What's your response to this article?

Geert Lovink: The phrase "The Internet is broken" than Evan has in fact circulated amongst geeks and engineers since 2013/14 in response to the revelations of Edward Snowden (the campaign used to have the <http://internetisbroken.org/> website). The slogan refers to the widely felt loss of privacy, caused by what we now call 'surveillance capitalism', in which the industrial-surveillance apparatus around the NSA and affiliated secret services broke the collective dream of a public internet in which users were in charge. The inventor of the World Wide Web, [Tim-Berners Lee](#), is playing an important role here, in the background. Or look at Wikitribune, crowdsourcing evidence-based journalism, the latest initiative of Jimmy Wales (Wikipedia). This issue has been a long one in the making. In that sense, the response of EV comes late. We're now more than half year into the 'fake news' meme (that comes from elsewhere anyway, for instance Ukraine). Silicon Valley has been slow to respond. We know from statistics that Californians did not vote for Trump, that's true. The real question is why he shut his mouth until now. Why can't Silicon Valley get rid of the New Age 'organized optimism' that is dictated by venture capitalists? Suppressed criticism is the real problem here. Everything is dominated by (self-) promotion and corporate marketing. This makes even the most basic form of reflection impossible, and ultimately makes these companies complicit. They become part of the problem. Another issue that is not addressed in this piece is the Economy of the Free. The fact is, neither Twitter nor Medium have a sound business model while the virtual community level has been destroyed at the same time. This is causing a lot of unforeseen problems. Social media giants are deeply undermining investigative journalism. What we end up with is superficial opinions of individual users, tweets and updates that appear, and disappear, in seconds.

DN: Evan Williams said: "If it's true that he wouldn't be president if it

weren't for Twitter, then yeah, I'm sorry." What do you think about this? Do you agree with Evan Williams about Twitter's role in this election?

GL: Twitter could have silenced Trump. There were people in the U.S. who argued that Trump's account should have been closed the minute he got elected. But that's all arguing behind the facts. Twitter is a relatively small service with almost no ordinary users. It's a channel for professionals. Trump got used to the direct mode of communication. Now that he's president he sees no point to step back and hand over the job to his press staff and PR people. Evan can't be sorry about that. But admit you're the new intermediate. That's the issue. Do not pretend you are innocent and a bystander. I agree with [Dave Winer](#) who has endlessly come up with actual code, constructive, detailed software proposals how to fix the problem between Twitter and mainstream media. Same with Jay Rosen. It's not as if this issue is new. What's happening now is that the unresolved issues of internet governance are having major implications. We can no longer distinguish between 'tech' firm and 'media companies'. Zuckerberg is fundamentally wrong here. Google and Facebook are parasites when it comes to news. They make billions off the work from others. This is also the case with Twitter but less so as they still have not figured out a workable business model.

DN: Twitter and Facebook are the first news media for millions of people around the world. They only get news through these channels. The next step will be that many presidents around the globe will act like Trump?

GL: No, we shouldn't worry about that. The person Trump is an anomaly. What's not so innocent is Cambridge Analytica and other companies that helped out in the background to target voters individually. Manipulation behind the scenes with 'big data' has a great future, not the rich candidate that cannot shut his mouth. We need to dismantle social media and disconnect the 'social network' side from the media content. This is quite an effort and I am wondering how we have to do this. Mixing the two is fatal, we see that now. I am not 'friends' with La Repubblica. It's not hard to see why this is wrong in the first place. I might be a reader, a fan, I pay for a subscription, yes. Sharing is yet another false metaphor. I am not a defender of the current copyright system, but it is not hard to see that the 'free' content is emptying out the public sphere. Internet was meant to be an addition, a bottom-up network. We need to go back the basics.

DN: Is democracy in danger?

GL: As an anarchist I never had much emotional investment in parliamentary democracy. I am working on self-determination and collective organization through free cooperation and decentralized networks. If 'democracy' is in danger, please see this as an opportunity to experiment with new models of organization, deliberation, aggregation and decision-making. If we return to the news industry, what's dangerous is the situation in Turkey and Hungary and how this model spreads to a place like the UK where May is proposing to censor their piece of the internet. It is clear that authoritarian top-down rule is on the march and grand coalitions are taking shape outside of the Old West, with main players China and Russia. If you are worried about democracy, join the self-defensive of civil society. Prepare yourself to get involved, and meet your actual friends.

DN: Do social networks really help us to be in contact, worldwide, or do they close us up in virtual solitary rooms?

GL: You mean social media, right? Social networks are something else. Twitter and Facebook are no longer networks. They are centralized platforms. This is not merely language policing. The question is: do we act upon information we receive? I doubt. And what if that news comes from far away, perhaps another continent? There is solidarity, for sure. The world is shrinking, but we got to look at crucial changes that make a maximum impact. They are usual small, and around the corner, caused by the breakdown of the everyday, when society collapses and people no longer cope. The trigger there is not alternative information, I fear.

Social media are not global, only their software is, they are centralized for efficient marketing reasons but the users doesn't get to see that. Most of us communicate in our own language and stay within our national boundaries. The 'news' might be global but our social networks are not. The 'filter bubble' problem exists but, in my opinion, should not be blown up. The social (and ethnic, race, gender) problems are real. Divisions in society are growing. They are not going to be overcome by balanced news or 'representation' but by effective policies in terms of taxation, redistribution of wealth and investments in public infrastructure, education and health. Social media are not going to uphold or 'correct' conflicts in society. Once, 5-10 years ago they might have played a (minor) role in organizing protests. This won't happen anymore outside of the United States.

DN: Why did you leave Facebook? You think no user can control it? Is it possible to use it in a wise way?

GL: I left Facebook in May 2010, together with 50.000 other users, in one of the first big protests against the ever-changing privacy settings, the stubborn Californian refusal of the dislike button and the 'one identity' policy, in which users do not have the freedom to alter their personal settings or have second accounts. Not even pseudonymity was allowed. There was never any way for users to alter, let alone control, Facebook. I do not want to argue with the 1.4 billion users. Our campaigns have not been successful. It is social suicide for many to leave the platform. The world population has been locked-in, and now there is no way out. The only hope is the young generations who are bored with the arcane interface and functionality and want to escape school and family (and then go to WhatsApps and Instagram, owned by the same Facebook...).

DN: Experts say trolling on Twitter and Facebook is the real problem. Do you think the problem is social media itself or the abuse of it?

GL: Trolling in school is certainly a problem, and luckily, many of the teachers, parents, therapists and other experts are working on this, worldwide. The answer can only be: education (say aloud, three times). We introduce all these real-time intimate media that every child can use, and presume they are outside of the curriculum. We do not see smart phones as part of math (which is, considering the history and composition of the technology, crazy). I am not even sure if 'media literacy' will do the job. Yes, this all involves a massive investment to train teachers. But what do we expect? We're in the midst of a revolution without consequences? The problem of this goes back to the unconcerned middle classes, the *petit bourgeoisie* that judges these frivolous devices as passing fashions. Internet is not taught anywhere. No serious studies at universities, can you imagine? Theatre, yes, cinema, of course, but internet is left to engineering and business. And then we start wondering about trolls?

DN: Companies like Facebook, Twitter and Google recently promised to stop fake news, verbal violence and harassment. They guaranteed to stop hate speech and extremist content from their websites. Do you think they can do it or is it too late?

GL: At least in Europe and other markets, the social platforms face serious regulation. If Facebook would have brought Marie LePen to power in France, Brussels would have responded immediately. The fact is, so far they haven't. The next test case is Merkel in Germany (who seems to be alright). However, the overall system is fragile, particularly in economic and financial

terms and the political class has very little grip on these dynamics. So far regulation is done both through software (filtering) and moderation by humans. Facebook is hiring thousands of unskilled Indians to do the content moderation job. At the same time, the social media giants are kindly asked to change their algorithm in favor of mainstream newspapers and public broadcasters (which they are willing to do as it does really affect their business models, remember these are all young business-engineers without principles, much like Albert Speer, willing to work with any government or dictator, much like IBM).

DN: You said social media keep us in a New Age regime, where we must be constantly positive: we can only say 'I like'... What are the consequences of this 'fake positivism'?

GL: The scheme is Freudian, in a classic manner. We witness the return of the repressed that appears elsewhere. What we see are happy people on their profile pages, they do what's expected from them: they 'like' celebrities and brands, TV series and social causes. At the same time they freak out as they can't pay their bills, lose their jobs, fail for exams, fall out with friends and family, and then the drama gets worse. Just read Nietzsche what he said about *ressentiment* in morality that results in a slave revolt. The consensus today amongst the liberal elites (both progressive and conservative) is that this 'slave revolt' will be nasty with an unpredictable, confused agenda. Marc Zuckerberg is, of course, innocent about all this. He will not be persecuted because of his long-term crusade against the 'dislike' button.

DN: Umberto Eco said Facebook is a place where *dumbs* can freely talk: are you agree with him? We can say that on Facebook Homer Simpson reasons at the same level with Barack Obama, they operate at the same level. Are we confused because we're mixing real facts and fake ones?

GL: *Dumbs* have always talked. The point is, in the past there were no recording devices that captured and stored casual conversations of the people. These days we do, albeit for marketing reasons. Remember, both Facebook and Google are, up to 90%, advertising companies. We should never discuss the 'social media question' outside of that banal reality. Today's gossip is a commodity. In universities and poly-techs we only teach social media marketing but no political economy. And this comes with a price. To come back to Eco's outburst of elitism, the NSA and associated media-tech corporations wouldn't be happy if we stopped talking on our devices. Let's be optimistic here and uncool social media, and work towards

an extravagant offline renaissance. My proposal would be to separate news and social, as a new social contract, if you like, much like the separation of church and state (which is also under pressure, again, in many parts of the world).