

Interview with Geert Lovink by Christophe Bruchansky

For [Plural World](#)

Christophe Bruchansky: In your 2016 book *Social Media Abyss: Critical Internet Cultures and the Force of Negation* you draw a distinction between social media platforms and organized networks. Can you explain what the difference is?

Geert Lovink: These two concepts are worlds apart. Social media is the digital reality of the connected multitudes. Billions of people depend on these centralized platforms for their daily communication with customers, relatives, friends and lovers. Organized networks, on the other hand, is not more than a proposal, a concept developed by me and my Sydney friend Ned Rossiter, back in 2005. The idea is simple. Let's put against the exploitative 'weak links' model of social media, the 'minor' practice of 'strong ties' in which we focus on small units that specialize in getting things done. Facebook and others have never been interested in facilitating its users with pragmatic online spaces that can be shielded off. Instead, we have to 'like' products and keep up with an ever-expanding blurry 'newsfeed' packed with cat pictures and world affairs and share this with a way too big, amorphous audience of 'friends'. Instead of giving users concrete collaborative tools, Facebook allowed third parties to 'harvest' their site with the latest data analytics tools. The disaster of that basic choice is now becoming visible for all to see in the unfolding Cambridge Analytica scandal.

CB: At its origin, the field of new media was raising many hopes. What was the original promise of social networks? And why, in your view, did it not materialize?

GL: I am not nostalgic. Internet beginnings were clumsy and culturally specific. It was a US-American space of military origin, built by male engineering, filled with hippie ideals that sounded self-evident and are now straight out alien. Take Douglas Schuler's book from 1996, *New Community Networks, Wired for Change*. The title of chapter one comes as a total surprise: "Community and Technology—A Marriage of Necessity". What? These days, no one talks about community anymore (or of networks, for that matter). Ever since 'social networks' turned into 'social media' the a-priori is the user-profile centric model in which the individual customer is the central category. The original promise was the networks themselves. Once marketing and advertisement took over, and infrastructure and ownership

were centralized, groups were no longer an interesting category. It is much harder to make money out of anonymous users that operate in 'swarms'. The corporate focus shifted towards targeting individuals, provoking them to tell even more about themselves and their preferences through 'likes'.

CB: Why was the original promise of social media important for people, and society as a whole, in terms of choice, personal agency and pluralism?

GL: Social media no longer promise anything. They don't need to advertise themselves and instead behave like benign invisible facilitators. Social media are the end stage of a certain development. The removal of the word 'network' happened with a purpose. Social media lock-in billions of users who from now on depend on these platforms for their information and social survival. Ten or twenty years ago a tiny part of the world population called 'early adopters' arguably had a choice and some agency (and with it, a historical responsibility, which they, or we, blew). This is no longer the case. We're not free to leave as this is considered 'social suicide' towards family and friends. In these precarious times it is an act of 'civil courage' to destroy one's future opportunities. Social media are necessary routines, part of our busy lives.

Social apps are ambivalent companions. When we check the phone, the apps take us briefly elsewhere, yet lock us into the same old. If only our devices would really take us elsewhere, into a space-time machine, to other possible worlds. This is a potential our current corporations never tapped into. Zuckerberg must detest dream machines.

Dopamine satisfies us for a second—and then quickly bores us, like any other drug. We put away the phone and come back to it to look for the same old (message). We need confirmation from others and demand equal amounts of affirmation back. We're precisely not seeking pluralism and 'difference'. All the literature confirms that we are caught in echo chambers of like-minded people. This is a product of certain design choices. We are made to search for the known and the familiar. The pluralist approach is precisely missing today and would be great alternative narrative for 21<sup>st</sup> century. We need to open ourselves to the trolls and misfits. If you think that filtering out dissidents is the way to go, you will sooner rather than later pay the price for this act of segregation.

Let's open ourselves to unexpected experiments. Imagine dating sites where you're confronted with the radical Other, search engines that deliberately

put you off the track, social media that connect you with the workers in China that produced the product you just purchased. Let me not get carried away with my own digital exoticism, you can dream up your own examples how we can rewire the world.

CB: You argue that social media lead to a state of “interpassivity”, a term coined by Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek. The platforms “recreate the community feelings of a lost tribe in computer-generated informality.” What choice or agency have we lost with the current social media platforms?

GL: We lost the collective ability to demand that another world is possible. We no longer have agency towards the technology itself, even though all these environments are high fluid and can easily be programmed, both by system operators as well as the users themselves. We can only regain agency if we demand to get back the toolbox function. Silicon Valley chose not to make money with tools. Most software tools are instruments for something else: collaboration, cooperation, peer-to-peer exchanges in which intermediaries cannot get in between in order to extract value. In order to get there, we might have to forget the platform as a technical synthesis of human interaction altogether and further develop the ‘network of networks’ idea. How can we undermine the upscaling effect that seems so inevitable? The network effect ultimately eliminates the very notion of the network itself. We all saw the mechanism unfolding itself (roughly speaking ten years ago) but no one was able to stop it. Before we move on we need to understand why it happened, otherwise history will repeat itself.

CB: You describe how the ideology of a certain tech elite lead to the current situation. But don’t we have a collective responsibility in this?

GL: Yes, but what precisely upsets you in the critique of the Californian Ideology? This is not any elite. Do they have a natural right to control and exploit us, simply because we didn’t figure out their methods and intentions soon enough? Let’s talk about the ‘friends’ logic as an example. This mono-dimension create a vast field in which people can be linked. Imagine if ‘we’ would have sabotaged the ‘friends’ logic from day one? I bet the micro-targeting of Cambridge Analytica would not have been possible.

CB: How might future social media developments affect digital and non-digital communities?

GL: Let’s politicize this. There is a lot of turmoil happening around ‘social

media,' as we speak. As always it is dangerous to predict the future. Is there any future for social media? The unprecedented centralization and ease of use of these platforms might be turn out to be a historical anomaly. We could read the current phase of the media development as a naïve stage, a happy and somewhat childish period, a dreamy state of global ignorance on the side of both users and nation states.

This is, of course, not the case in authoritarian countries (who know better), such as China, Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi-Arabia, but also think of other no quite naïve players such as the Israeli info war complex, the world of Russian state hackers and secret services worldwide. To some extend a bunch academics, critics and investigate journalists already knew about the state of affairs and welcomed the revelations, from Manning to Snowden to Wylie, as evidence.

'Informational dominance' will have to be operated in a different way, the Facebook way is bankrupt, over and out. What's next is the breakdown of the advertisement model of Google and Facebook. They will need other business models. The social media question boils down to the social contract of our times: we give you the online service for free and in exchange gather and resell your data to third parties. Future models will need to monetize through subscriptions or otherwise, with or without blockchain elements. On our side of the story, we need to understand how to untangle and decentralize the 'stack', and Europe will have to take the lead. This is not going to come from Trump's Make America Great Again.

CB: You advocate the creation of decentralized alternatives to existing social networks; social networks that would be much more value-based and politically engaged. What could be done to encourage their creation?

GL: Since 2011, the year of Arab Spring, the movement of the squares and Occupy, our Institute of Network Cultures has been trying to coordinate the building of social media alternatives through an initiative called *Unlike Us*. I can't say this was very successful so far. The network still exists. The support in Europe wasn't overwhelming. EU research funding schemes never prioritized social media alternatives. Calls remain abstract and technical and refuse to address the real issues where Europe really needs to step in. After the French-German disaster of building an alternative search engine there might be a trauma out there... Some believe in regulation but that takes decades (see Google). The idea that Europe needs to build up its own parallel industry perhaps has too much resemblance with the Chinese

Communist Party approach? Is Europe a US backyard after all? Why can we have a European aerospace business but proclaim ourselves unable to compete when it comes to social media applications? I can give multiple historical explanations of this but that doesn't help us in this crucial period. It is not yet too late. The uptake can be swift. Getting rid of Facebook and Google in Europe is entirely possible, we just need the political will to act.

CB: Will there always be a place in people's lives for purely non-digital communities and how will the interplay between digital and non-digital communities impact their choices in life?

GL: Offline romanticism in Europe occupies me. We can deconstruct its discourse, understand its psychology and Nietzschean drive to master the tools. We can look at it from a medical/health perspective and promote correctional measures to heal our backs, postures—and brains. This is all necessary. Yet, what's most needed is the collective will to build—and own-our platforms that are local, democratic utilities to facilitate the needs of everyone. Let's disrupt the logic of extraction and go for non-addictive design principles. I do not believe there are non-digital communities. What we can do is facilitate that people can come together in public spaces that are safe, without surveillance. Let's undermine fear mongering and the policing of the city and public discourses. If this can be done by going offline for a while, go for it. We have the right to forget Facebook. Let's make it happen.