"Fragmentation of the internet is our key aim right now."

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Geert Lovink, net critic and theorist and advisory editor of Catharsis and Swagat Baruah, managing editor of Catharsis discuss the recent Cambridge Analytica data mining scandal and other relevant issues pertaining to the internet and social media.

Swagat Baruah: The data mining scandal involving Cambridge Analytica and Facebook doesn't come as a surprise given the highly centralized and porous system of data information that exists today. How do you see the changing interplay of privacy and social media? Have we reached a stage where compromise of privacy is the first consequence of entering the social media world?

Geert Lovink: The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek has been writing about this dilemma for decades now, updating the classic categories of ideology and false consciousness: we know Facebook is bad, yet we continue to use it. The need to connect and be part of the 'social' tribe engulfs the larger issue of data extraction and the political economy of the media. I need not emphasize the fact that Facebook is violating our privacy. This is obviously the case, but apart from a small group that is bothered by secret services and police repression, this doesn't bother each of us—yet. However, privacy is a particular Western notion. For me, the filter bubble is a much larger issue that affects many more people. The question is how we blow up this regressive tendency in online culture and free ourselves of corporate manipulations that belittle us instead of assisting us in accomplishing the huge tasks ahead that we face in the 21st century. We need to be exposed to the world, we can't afford to withdraw ourselves.

The fact that we have no sovereignty over the architecture of our own networks bothers a growing group of people, worldwide. Facebook is a childish one-dimensional version of 'the social', as the Italians call it. We can do better than that. The richness of our human expressions and subtle responses is reduced to likes and updates, performed for 'friends'—for no

technical reason. The system is geared towards advertisement and the production of personal data that can be sold to third parties. Instead of serving networks, we become slaves that erect platforms for the Pharaohs of our time. The deliberate reduction of what can be done with the internet is criminal as it deprives us of possible worlds. We need open, many-to-many communication channels that empower organisation for change. Instead, we're moving away, every tiny micro-second, by technologies of distraction that we fail to understand. Very recently, I wrote an essay on this topic, titled [Distraction and its Discontents](#) in which I try showing respect for all those who struggle with social media addiction. The last thing I want, as a critic, is to look down on 'addicted' users and come up with some pedagogic teachings. I am a techno-materialist and activist and part of movements that try to realise 'commons'. We struggle to revolutionise society and are not happy with small neo-liberal reforms that blame individuals for the online mess.

SB: In 2017, Nick Srnicek (King's College London) called for the [nationalisation of](#) platforms such as Facebook, Google and Amazon, which hold a monopoly over data. He called them "too big" to serve public interest. What are your thoughts on the idea of nationalisation?

GL: After Brexit, continental Europe is not in position to judge what's good or bad for the UK. A nationalisation proposal like this, coming from Theresa May's Island, sounds like a radical yet untimely idea. In my opinion nationalisation of social media services can only happen inside greater entities such as the common market of the European Union. I would prefer to talk about 'socialisation'–Nick would perhaps agree with that—and use the Cold War term [disarmament](#). Let's start working on the decommission of Facebook. I doubt if it has any useful elements that we can reuse after its bankruptcy (I do not mean this in financial terms). Would your address book still be useful? Maybe for some. We know it has been bloated and inflated by algorithms to pump up the amount of 'friends'.

I am inspired by the concrete proposals [Dirk Lewandowski](#) (Hamburg, Germany) developed to transform Google's search engine into a commons, and turn it into a public knowledge infrastructure that is owned by everyone. Google was built by us all, they used our search queries as resource. We could develop similar proposals for Facebook such as publicly owned IDs and leave the identification to neutral non-profit bodies (such as the World Wide Web consortium?). Traditional nationalisation would leave the underlying

architecture intact. The Social Media Question is not just about data ownership. The main target while deconstructing Facebook would be its profile-centric design, as this underlies the entire business model. Do not forget Zuckerberg's ongoing crusade against anonymous use of the networks and pseudonyms, as this would render his databases useless for both NSA and advertisers… Let's imagine other network principles and make a start. It's not hard at all.

SB: The alleged Russian intervention in the 2016 US Elections are currently being investigated by the Robert Mueller committee. Whatever the consequences maybe, the allegations itself toll an alarming bell. What is the likeliness of a Balkanised net with several national subnets resulting from attempts to prevent surveillance by foreign public and private entities?

GL: Fragmentation is our key aim right now. It is called decentralisation, or federalisation, to be more precise. The Balkanisation of the internet is a fact and this process has been facilitated by Google and Facebook, together with the authoritarian regimes of China, Iran, Russia, Turkey and so many more countries. This is also a dream of Narendra Modi. Centralisation is a key element in the process of 'Balkanisation'. There is a need of a wall, to clearly define the territory, including policing the membranes that regulate the traffic that goes in and out (satellites, cables).

We urgently need singular local ecologies. Let's not be afraid that they will be locked-off and fail to see the larger picture. The global picture we now have is narrow and does not create sustainable networks. It's time for experimentation and let's not close down initiatives simply because they cannot scale up overnight.

SB: You keep yourself away from social media. In the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal people have started deleting their Facebook account, starting a trend detrimental to Facebook. In reality, however, Facebook engulfs almost the entire human population today and is hard to evade. How do you think should social media users at an individual level tackle such crises?

GL: We're not there yet. It's too early to say that the emerging #deletefacebook movement is causing a 'crisis'. It depends on all of us if we can turn the momentum, which is certainly there, into a cascade. The way to do this is to leave together and not leave it up the individual user to decide this and sort out all the obstacles. The exodus will need a song, a theme, a

call to arms, manifestos, t-shirts and memes such as the one below:.

I am not a purist. I use Twitter and occasionally go back to Linkedin (it is a service that I keep on forgetting and do need to erase). I left academia.edu a year ago when they were drifting off in the wrong direction. I joined one of the first campaigns to leave Facebook, back in 2010, when the problems that are addresses now were becoming apparent (early reports go back to 2007).

Both Max Schrems' *Europe vs. Facebook* and our *Unlike Us* network both started in 2011 when alternatives such as Diaspora and Lorea were promising networks of networks. The famous year of Arab Spring, the movement of the squares and Occupy didn't last and fell apart quickly. Funnily enough, the Snowden revelations of June 2013 turned out to have a negative effect on social media alternatives. The pilots not only had to be decentralised with sexy interfaces that impress millennials (which is really hard for geeks to build, with no alternative usability/UX interface design experts around that were willing to join the struggle) but they also had to be 100% secure, using the latest crypto algorithms. All this has not been solved. All the more reason to get involved, but first #deletefacebook.