

Published first on March 18, 2018 by [K24](#) in Turkish.

Tuğçe Yılmaz: *Social Media Abyss* is the fifth volume of your ongoing investigation into critical internet culture. What is the main idea behind your treatment of social media as a dreadful abyss?

Geert Lovink: The motive of falling into an vortex is a scary one, I agree. It indicates that we're no longer in charge. The tools are no longer cool and our curiosity is fading. We are trapped in the golden cage of the social. A decade into the saga, we start to get an glimpse how these social media operate—and what the cost the 'free' is. The origin of abyss image goes back to the June 2013 'awakening' when Edward Snowden proved that 'the internet is broken'. The internet innovation cycle has come to an end. We realize that we ended up in a culture dominated by consolidation and regression, in which quasi-monopolies are cornering us to extract ever more data. The childish functionality of social media reflects this.

The Edgar Allan Poe motive of the abyss suggests an immolation of the self, whereas we usually associate social media with empowerment and positive self-promotion. The rewarding dopamine moments do exist, but the overall feeling is one of anxiety, boredom and depression. It's a zero learning environment, designed not to upset us. As Zuckerberg said, when he testified before the U.S. Senate, users should not feel uncomfortable. The experience should not be shocking. The question is no longer about newness and expectations what social media could deliver. Instead, we are confronted with a world dominated by growing inequality, depletion and conflict in which we all try to keep up, fall behind, fail to respond, make the wrong choices, or worse: no choice at all. That's when you know you're floating down the abyss.

TY: You postulate that the digital version of monopoly state capitalism has superseded technological optimism, to paraphrase Lenin. Since when do you think that we have left behind the laissez faire era?

GL: Monopolies in media and IT are not new. As you say, this is inherent to capitalism that preaches markets, yet produces monopolies. During my professional life this started off with the Microsoft operating system and the 'browser wars', the Google search engine, followed by their Android operating system for smart phones, and now Facebook. This is not just a matter of marketing, access to capital and political lobbying (although all three help). Nowadays, the ability to dominate a market can be programmed

into the software, for instance through the default import of your address book. In this way you don't have to do much to reach the 'network effect'. It's all about speed of 'first movers' to reach a critical mass. That's what Zuckerberg meant with "breaking things."

At the time this surprised insiders: how can social media grow so fast and wipe out their competition within months, or even weeks? This is because we still think such 'contamination' occurs one after the other: I tell you, you recommend it to your sister etc. The creation of networks is now automated (which, as a side effect, meant the marginalization of network theory). Venture capitalist Peter Thiel has formalized the abolition of laissez faire market capitalism in his book *Zeros and Ones*, in which defends Silicon Valley monopolies. Ever since this confession of a powerful insider, the discussion should have moved on to why there is an absence of regulation, why anti-trust does not apply here and why researchers and academics do not speak up. The non-debate during Zuckerberg's hearing in the US Senate was telling, in this respect. One senator kept on comparing Facebook with choice we have between car brands. Zuckerberg had no answer to this. He seemed to live on another planet. Competition is for losers. We have a natural right to be a monopoly (but he didn't dare to say that, the coward).

TY: Facebook and Twitter transform the internet into a handful of social media. Given Zuckerberg's recent testimony before Congress, how effective is Facebook's algorithmic filtering in producing political outcomes?

GL: Key is the concept of microtargeting: micro-surgery with data with the aim to alter society. Terms such as manipulation, propaganda and censorship are dull knives. Social media tools are utilized in narrowly-defined constituencies and no longer target 'the masses'. The target audience has become so well defined; what Americans say: creepy. This is an example the [New York Times](#) gave how precise Facebook can define the target audience: "Anyone who lives in Philadelphia, studies philosophy in college, is 21, has bought a blue T-shirt in the past year, is neurotic, makes less than \$28,000 a year, is likely to buy a minivan in the next six months, is interested in camping and whose interests align with those of African-Americans. Plus, anyone on Facebook who is similar to them." Facebook announced that it would stop doing this but let's see if this is the case, and what comes next. Societies are deeply divided over key issues, and this means that if politicians need a majority of votes (for instance, in a district or state), micro-targeting becomes a vital tools if you want to go from 49,35%

to 51.20 %. The political class will have a hard time outlawing micro-targeting—unless you disconnect social media from advertising.

TY: You're a harsh Twitter critic. Do you think that we see ourselves as self-conscious active users or has that possibility already vanished? Are we unable to encounter our own will?

GL: There's a clash between the schematic nature of software and the free will of humans. We're free to sign-up, download and log-in. But then users start to mess the system. We lie about our age, ignore questionnaires, forget to answer, walk away. After all, it's only information. I like the idea that the free human doesn't know the cost of information. They don't care and cannot be blackmailed in the first place. That's 'data sovereignty'.

In the 1990s our ADILKNO collective wrote short speculative manifestos about this superior mentality, in which users overcome the vain intentions of companies such as Facebook. However, most of us are too busy to survive and get caught in subconscious habits. There are kids to take off, friends and lovers to meet, be in time for work, cook, call family. Social media both disrupt and assist in order to juggle the multitasking lives we live. This where the subliminal interventions of Silicon Valley come in. User experience designer, together with behavioral psychologists carefully study the patterns in our daily lives. How can the Free Will respond to this cognitive arms race over our attention that happens in milliseconds? This cannot be done by individual means. As individuals we're too weak. Machines already know us intimately. If we strike back, we need to call in the Collective Will.

TY: Can we succeed to leave behind the collective horror and anxiety which has a universal dimension in order to neutralize and disable technology, as you assert in your claim?

GL: The technologies we encounter in the internet realm are at first intense, intimate and 'totalizing' experiences. However, they are also volatile, extremely messy and boring on the long term. What's gathered today, is defunct tomorrow, cannot be combined with next generation profiles, is lost. Cybernetic machine of today are best in when they are utilized right now. Of course, data are stored, but that's irrelevant if you look at what can done with them today.

TY: Given that our private and public lives are increasingly mediated by

smart phones, is it really possible to decide overnight to abandon them? Changing a well-established habit is not that easy. As we're surrounded by powerful apparatuses of capture, how can we possibly manage to break with them?

GL: Young people are already bored with Facebook. That's for old people, parents, teachers and other authorities. The next question would be how we 'uncool' the smartphone itself. I am not pessimistic in that respect. The problem is not the ability or willingness of next generations to revolt and cut their chains with repressive techniques. The issue is not one of fashion that come and go but the long-term lock-in strategy, the ability to hijack an entire society and force them to use these devices if they want to access vital services. Soon we can no longer pay in shops or take the airplane or train without a smartphone, we're forced to use Google or Facebook for identification purposes, we can no longer our office or apartment. This is not at all related to social media 'addiction' and digital detox is not an appropriate answer to these one-sided measures. We should say no to this ID business, together. The digital detox therapy is not addressing such issues and is only focused on individual 'mindfulness'. It is not enough, and perhaps even counterproductive, to go offline for certain amounts of time. We need to understand, criticize, and change the underlying network and software architectures, together.

TY: You find social media valuable because they 'disrupt' mainstream media. At the same time they also contributed to the consolidation of ISIS. Is social media a double-edged sword?

GL: I am not using corporate terms such as disruption. If anything, I would talk about self-organization, creating counter-publics that can intervene in a tactical manner. My concern has never been about the future of this or that information carrier, such as radio, print or television, but how new degrees of freedom can be achieved. If a new medium opens up there is short window of opportunity to define the underlying architecture. Will this structure enable more creativity, autonomy, a wider range of voices and practices, or is it more of the same old? Or even reactionary in nature, as we see happening with crypto-currencies that embed a range of right-wing libertarian value, right in the core of the code. ISIS indeed made clever use of social media and we can thank Facebook, Google, Telegram and Twitter for that. This is what happens when you delegate collaborative content filtering to software.

TY: From Gezi Park in Istanbul to the June 2013 riots in Brazil and the Black Live Matters protests, deployment of social media played an undeniable role in the rise of these movements. You explain the non-sustainable nature of these mass mobilizations becoming politically less passionate over time with the fact that they tend to consume their newsworthy content which is often unable to survive beyond the spectacle of the event. Are there other factors that reinforce this self-consuming tendency of movements?

GL: There is no doubt a positive influence in some cases when authorities had little clue and the protests were able to spread and grow fast. Movement cannot operate outside of techno-social realm. My issue here is not the mobilization that happened here in there but their short-lived character. Social movements have a range of needs. First of all there is the key phase of preparation in which small, dispersed groups come together, conspire and create 'mass symbols', events, slogans and demands so that the movement can come into being. These ingredients are essential. Social media as we know them now will almost never play a role in this early stage. They step in when the 'memes' are in place and start to spread the appealing messages that convince many to come into action.

Where social media do not deliver is at the level of internal strategic debates and public forums where arguments are developed, tested and criticized. Then here is level we do not hear about at all in this current buzz: collective decision making. Should groups and networks vote and use technologies to do so? And last but not least there is the hot topic of 'news' and our growing inability to distinguish this info genre from PR and marketing. Future radical movements will revolt against news logic and the news discourse. We are not news. We're something different all together. We're many, and here to stay (even when we're no longer 'new'). This is ultimately a revolt against Time and its manifestation in the timeline. Its symbol used to be the clock but what's time today? There's no time. It has collapsed into real-time. How do we stand up against the time regime?

TY: How can we go beyond net activism and its impasses? Can a political party or leadership serve as an alternative model of collective coordination?

GL: I am neither a fan of political parties nor of leaders. I believe in self-organization, using the tools and platforms that we can design—and change—ourselves, whenever we like. Current social media do not bring people together into sustainable social entities. They are designed for overworked individuals, locked-up in their filter bubble/echo chamber/abyss,

busy trying keep up with their precarious e-lives. There is no way revolutionaries can 'compete' at that level. Corporate content will always outsmart you—unless you step out and changes the rule of the game. The question you pose relates to the question of internal decision making culture. Right now the dominant form is one of consensus seeking in an assembly-type setting. For me that's fine but we all know there are small groups in charge of that process. Instead of formalizing this in a membership structure with votes, I am interested to empower new forms of small groups, kernels, if you like. What's avant-garde today? We need more groups and collectives, conspiracies, informal gatherings, meetings in cafes. Think up a concept and rock the boat.

TY: Considering the distinction you make between “anonymous voyeurism” and “exhibitionist display”, which one do you find more dangerous? Or, let me ask you: which side are you on?

GL: Excusez-moi, but I never made this distinction. The essence of this interactive age is that everyone has to come up with input, no matter how tiny or subliminal, otherwise nothing happens on the screen. Even you refuse, you are condemned to produce data. There's no such thing as 'interpassivity'. If only. That's a continental European romantic notion. We click, make keystrokes, agree to allow cookies, swipe away profiles, scroll through updates, and all these moves are carefully stored. As a theorist, critic and activist I am on the side of the creators. I am a bad lurker, although I am fan of cinema. A love affair a la Baudrillard with the notion of the indifferent 'silent masses' that absorb all energies in their superior fatal strategy against the social has been short-lived. We're drawn into 'dataism', that's the new ideology, which Yuval Harari presents to us as “the most interesting religion, which venerates neither god nor man, it worships data.” I am not sure who he's talking about. Computer scientists, bureaucrats, managers, for sure. They are the true believers and try to pull everyone into their religion. Everywhere they look they see data flows—and so should we. Organisms are not algorithms, I am not and neither are you. I am a data nihilist: I believe in zeros.