

Listen to the 10 minutes podcast INTERSTITIAL EP008: Sad by Design here: <https://thinkbelt.org/shows/interstitial>. Read the transcript of the radio interview with Geert Lovink by David Huber here:

We are living in a period of real-time revolutions. Things develop very, very fast. We are all acutely aware of this. However, this is not what people experience. People experience, precarity, loneliness. It's especially felt at the level of daily lives of young people. They are the ones that sense this incredible contradiction between a medium that is constantly preaching change and the actual stagnation and resignation and regression that is felt on their daily lives.

My name is Geert Lovink. I'm a Dutch media theorist and internet critic, and author of Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism.

Maybe I can read...and then, um, I will, uh, uh.... So this is the first paragraph of this "Sad by Design" essay, which is kind of a book within a book. Try and dream, if you can, of a mourning app. The mobile has come dangerously close to our psychic bone, to the point where the two can no longer be separate. If only my phone could gently weep. McLuhan's extensions of man has imploded right into the exhausted self. Social media and psyche have fused, turning daily life into a social reality that, much like artificial reality and virtual reality, is overtaking our perception of the world and its inhabitants. Social reality is a corporate hybrid between handheld media and the psychic structure of the user. It's a distributed form of social ranking that can no longer be reduced to the interests of state and corporate platforms. As unlined subjects, we are implicit—far too deeply involved. Social reality is our reality, and works in peer-to-peer fashion. It's all about you and your profile. Likes and followers define your social status. But what happens when nothing can motivate you anymore, when all the self optimization techniques fail and you begin to carefully avoid those forms of emotional analytics? Compared to others your ranking is low and this makes you sad.

So there's quite a distinct period, let's say in 2009-10 when this kind of facilitating character of blogs and, you know, where all these new platforms would look at the user and would, uh, stimulate the user, you know, to upload things, to get involved. Where that comes to an end and where this extractive logic of the social media suddenly becomes visible, where the underlying business models of the few players that remain, all of the sudden reveal themselves. And in this very confusing year of 2011 that we see both

directions. Remember, 2011 is the year of Arab Spring, the protests against austerity in Spain, riots in London. But it's also the year of Occupy. So it's the year in which these social media have been used for a mobilizations across the globe, but at the same time it was a year when people for the first time recognized how the Facebooks and Googles, et cetera, were working economically speaking—what their political economy was.

If we remember Myspace or if we remember even blogging, there's a lot of things you can change, alter, right? None of that applies anymore to the current social media. The only thing you can change is the content itself that you look at. So the whole environment is the same, and it has to stay the same. Otherwise, the data cannot be moved and cannot be compared and then sold to third parties. What has also changed is this relentless pace of updating and changing. So the interaction now is so much faster.

The sadness is just a minuscule moment of almost reflection, right? This is how I describe it. But there's also an impossibility of a true reflection, and this is how it should be distinguished from melancholia or melancholy, as we've known it, as it was described many thousands of years ago already and was cultivated then in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century. Now we don't have time to be melancholic, which is precisely the problem. So this techno-sadness that I describe here are minuscule moments of almost-reflection. They have a possibility in it of a reflection, but they never really materialize. Why? Because the next, you know, message has already arrived.

Remember, each and every smartphone has more computational capacity than the entire Apollo 11 space program had and we know to effectively do with this so little. But it's a problem, especially, for my generation, for activists, for theorists, for critics. Because we come from the time when we looked at the tools to use them for our own means. But these days, yeah, we know that the smartphone, is obviously not a tool, right? It's a platform, and it's ruling us. We are not taking control of this. And that is a difficult aspect I cannot really deal with so easily, because from an activist point of view, you could say this whole sphere of sadness is not taking us anywhere. This is a dead-end street. My last book was called Social Media Abyss, and we are in the abyss. And this is really difficult to admit. The only question then becomes, is it necessary to first admit that you're in the abyss before you can somehow get the energy to climb out? Or should we forget about it altogether?

This book is trying to be a witness of where we are. So that's maybe the good thing, the best thing. But we have to admit that if you would take this material as a starting point for a political analysis or a strategy, it wouldn't take you anywhere. And I'm the first to admit that.

I'm very optimistic about these discussions that are happening everywhere about fundamentally different ways in which these platform architectures should be designed. So the fundamental question, for instance, is, we should get rid of the profile-centered design. If we want anything like social media, the center of it should be social and not the self. Integral to that should be ways to make money for individual users. We need to get rid of the economy of the free in order for culture, and also for alternative ideas, to thrive. The idea that we are benefiting from the potlatch, forget it.

(thanks to John Longwalker who produced the music fragments)