

Interview with Geert Lovink for the Spanish-Mexican magazine Letras Libres by [Paula Corroto](#), conducted for the launch of the Sad by Design translation into Spanish, TRISTES POR DISEÑO - Las redes sociales como ideología, published by [Consonni](#).

Spanish translation of the interview:

<https://www.letraslibres.com/espana-mexico/politica/entrevista-geert-lovink-la-cuenta-trump-en-twitter-deberia-haber-sido-bloqueada>.

Original English version here:

Paula Corroto: You're quoting Evgeny Morozov: "1990s tech utopianism posited that networks weaken or replace hierarchies. In reality, networks amplify hierarchies and make them less visible." And you add: internet is the dumping ground of our brain. When did this change become visible?

Geert Lovink: In 2004 I was given the unique opportunity to have my own research unit inside a large Dutch polytech, the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. I coined it the Institute of Network Cultures. At the time I was already more a decade active with community networks inside the internet. It was only after 2016, the year of Brexit, Trump and Cambridge Analytica that I realized the platform logic had not only taken over the Net but had also made networks as such abundant. Are networks on their way out? Up to today, we use small decentralized networks and large centralized platforms as synonyms—but they're no longer (Morozov is making the same mistake in this quote, as we all do). Informal and invisible networks can still undermine hierarchies, but not if they are situated inside platforms.

However, it is true what Morozov notices: current social media designs make everything smooth, bland and flat. It has become harder to imagine power structures once we're captured inside such large systems. To do that we need to step outside to re-invent a common language that can describe today's social power structures and make inequalities visible again. My concern here is with the concept of 'the social' itself. What's social in the age of social media and how would it relate to classic class analyses but also to terms such as tribe, community, group, cell, scene, movement, and, yes, network.

PC: In your book, you insist that the Internet and social networks are no longer 'new media'. When did they cease to be new and what are 'new media' today?

GL: If there's one term that defined the tech 90s, it's 'new media' (not IT or even the internet). Not one but many, and new as in exciting, open, full of possibilities. The introduction of digital 'networks' to old, centralized, top-down analogue media industries such as newspapers, book printing, cinema, television and radio has a special meaning to use, communication-hungry humans. These days, the internet is impacting other, somewhat invisible sectors such as logistics, city planning, education, agriculture and health care. This is a process now called 'digitization'. Things have shifted away from the media and communication sector that got stagnated in the social media 'desert'. The regression is real. Instead, we see investments going elsewhere, in clean, invisible 'black box' sectors in which users aka citizens do not play any role except as ignorant objects of surveillance. Once again, we're in direct opposition to the engineering class and their 'expert knowledge' that 'service' us with projects such as Big Data for the Good, Artificial Intelligence for the Good and, not to forget, Blockchain for the Good. The IT class has abandoned the 'messy' broken internet and have left it up to the political class to regulate it (a task which they'll be more than happy to take up). Invisible moderators, also called 'cleaners', can mop up the dirt. How did we get here? To me, on the other hand, new media today would mean to build radical alternatives that can beat the social media blues: decentralized tools that are owned and controlled in the public domain as a commons.

PC: If social networks no longer report, what do they actually do? What are they for? And why do they have so much activity?

GL: I'd prefer not to talk about 'social networks'. This term has become confusing. You probably mean social media (monopolies). We're lured to click, swipe and like as much so that we produce as much data as possible, which are collected, analyzed and then sold to third parties. But if we want to make a critical analysis, we need to start from scratch. One way to do this would be to look at our smartphone use from an ethnographic perspective as if we would be studying an alien tribe. What if these platforms are neither social nor media in the classic sense? Crucial in this, in my opinion, would be a new understanding of the role of the update (or newsfeed). The messages we are supposed to read are constantly 'overruled' by new ones. If we would be completely Zen, and not under a constant pressure to perform, earn money, be on time, and optimize our self, it would not be fine to just be part of the flow and let it pass by. However, some messages are vital. They are the real news and interrupt our busy daily lives: we need to respond, to act,

inform others. What our 500+ ‘friends’ are up to is wurscht (as the Germans say). One way to untangle this mess would be to re-introduce a strong separation between ‘news’ and ‘personal affairs. Social media architectures today are deliberately mixing up the two. We try whatever we can to administrate the flow in separate WhatsApp groups, moving to Telegram, using Instagram instead of Facebook to keep in contact with friends that really matter but these are pathetic measures.

PC: The first chapters of the book are about the sadness that social networks produce for us. Or regret and guilt. This is something we already intuitively knew. However, as was once the question with tobacco, why are we still hooked on the networks?

GL: I prefer not to medicalize others. The slogan is: We Are Not Sick. It is appealing to talk about addiction but I’d rather use terms such a dependency. The 2.3 billion Facebook users are not patients that need to see a doctor (extreme use is probably comparable to computer game addiction and can be dealt with through therapies). The real issue here is subtle ‘behavioural modifications’—code that can easily be changed. The best would be if we, Europeans, build our own tools that we can use for self-organization purposes. Communication with others is essential. Let’s not mix it up with ads, friends that do not really matter, annoying family, irrelevant hashtags or news. In that way, we’re less likely to become ‘addicted’ and distracted.

PC: You write: “Hyperreality becomes our daily situation, regardless of whether it is perceived as boring or marginal.” If everything is fiction, where is fiction today if it’s no longer to be found in literature or the arts, in cinemas or the theatre?

GL: We escape to ‘reality parks’ (also known as adventure holidays). There we experience the shock of the real as something new. Our busy everyday lives are neither surreal nor unreal, just boring—dominated by Social Reality (SR). The idea of fiction as some other world we read about, and enter through our imagination, has been superseded by ‘real-life’ experiences that can basically happen anywhere, at any time. We do not need to travel to exotic locations. Artificial Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) can be consumed at home, so do recreational drugs such as psychedelics. In the 90s people used to surf the internet. Fiction can happen inside those additional realities. Storytelling is not dead, we just have to be open for 21st-century formats. There is a special role here for European content industries that

should be radically be opened up for young generations instead of imposing the same old opera and feature film formats on its populations. Begin with collective streaming experiences, interconnect localities. There are many other examples. Let's open up our collective tech imagination and forget, for once, the rightwing libertarian Silicon Valley culture.

PC: Politics has also been fictionalized. We know Trump better from his tweets than from his speeches (which are, in fact, similar to his tweets). All politicians have to be on social media. What consequences does this have?

GL: No matter where you go, political classes have been reluctant in the adoption of the Net. This has slowly changed over the past decade and only since 2016 become widely spread. In any respect this is recent. PR and marketing firm have so far only dealt with social media as additional channels. The idea that campaigning there can make a crucial, if not decisive, difference is still new (and still contested). The irony here is that society is way ahead of its decision-makers. Isn't it strange that those who decide over our future are so far behind? I feel sorry for them. Take the toys from the boys, that's my take. Trump's Twitter accounts should have been blocked straight away. Some in the tech community suggested this, late 2016, but now it's probably too late.

PC: Then what's left for us, journalists? What are the media destined to report about?

GL: Ever since Web 2.0 and the rise of portals, search engines and RSS-feeds of blogs it has become clear how cheap, fast and easy it is to reproduce 'global news'. We also know for some time that the answer to this more investigate journalism. The question is how to finance these long-term investigations as traditional media outlets are no longer interested. Maybe we should also think of a 21st-century update of the 'foreign correspondent': cultural mediators, civil ambassadors, travel writers. We still need deep, local knowledge. Can we reorganize that in a distributed, peer-to-peer fashion? In the end, it all comes down to the collective obligation we have to invent new revenue streams. We, content animals, need to be directly involved in the current debates about the redefinition of money. How can income directly flow to the artists, writers, thinkers and researchers? How can we redistribute wealth, not just through taxation but also in a direct way?

PC: Let's talk about fake news. Is it necessary to teach our readers the 'use

of networks’?

GL: Computer literacy is certainly necessary. Against most predictions, young users have less tech skills in comparison to ten years ago. Fake news has always been there. I do not like the term. Manipulation is of all times. However, we can dismantle the monopoly platform and empower more users to run their own networks. But we have to be realistic and can’t have it both ways. Post-truth can also mean that traditional institutions have lost their monopoly over the control of their own ‘truth production’. In the age of ‘deep fakes’, I do not believe in ‘truth certificates’ or ‘reality seals’. Yes, we can collectively moderate comment sections. We can tame trolls and still have interesting disputes. I do not believe in algorithmic censorship as a solution for today’s racism, xenophobia and antisemitism. This needs to come from education and culture: as they spread hate and cultivate inequalities, then how are media and networks suddenly going to be all that different?

PC: Several media have launched paywalls. Should we read this as a loss of authority? Do you think this is a positive development?

GL: You call it paywall, I’d rather talk about subscriptions. I like Patreon and Netflix, which both, in their own way, show that users are indeed more than willing to pay for content. Listeners pay for their favourite podcast. We should get rid of the Silicon Valley social contract in which we get all their online services for free in exchange for our data that are extracted (and the traded) behind our backs. Free should be a choice, not the default. Precarity amongst designers, critics and others in the cultural sectors has to come to an end.

PC: If selfies are not just a narcissistic stance, then what are they? You’ve dedicated a chapter to selfies. Some authors state that selfies are the final stage of democratization and an expression of existentialism.

GL: The online self is a hydra, a multi-headed beast; selfies can mean many things. Initially, there was a sense of empowerment (amongst young women, mainly), mixed with a traditional unease of vanity. Now that the selfie craze and ‘over-sharing syndrome’ are fading away, we open up for other interpretations. Sometimes I see the selfie as a desperate sign of the neo-liberal subject to remain dignity. Selfies are part of a self-representation machine that invites us to show that we are alive, and still count. Who am I to condemn? It’s not the role of the critic to moralize. Instead, we should deconstruct and come up with strong, appealing concepts that take up the

task to beat platforms, software, interface designs. Who's up for this task? It's doable to put selfies in the art history tradition of self-portraits. But then we run the risk to oversee the deep tech layers in these ritualized, automated images. Selfies are embedded in our recommendation economy and, tragically, feed the Facial Recognition Machine. So, yes, let's study selfies and use them as gateways, entry points for new theory. What is existentialism in our digital age? Ever tried reading Camus, Sartre and De Beauvoir with our tired screen eyes? Does it make sense? Let me know. They struggled with nihilism and a void of meaning. So do we.

PC: Memes have not stopped growing. In your meme chapter you point out how they have been much more exploited by the right than by the left. Why is this? Is 'memecracy' an example of a certain reactionary wave that is making the round?

GL: The dominant culture of today is openly right-wing, conservative and nationalistic. This is not different on the internet. The counter-culture is not opposing this in a way one would expect. Instead of protest and resistance we see an attitude of ironical distance that neither opposes the neo-liberal ideology nor embraces its organized optimism. Meme culture appears in this void. Memes are operating on the fringe. They never appear on TV or in a magazine and are neither analyzed there. Ever heard of a meme commentator? Perhaps their status of informal pop culture is similar to that of comics? Memes are archetypical image-text combinations that are easy to share and comment. They are easy to digest data items that one passes around inside informal networks. Memes are cynical yet funny and give us a break. We need that short-lasting distance to the blues of the world—knowing that the politically correct boss will neither understand, let alone appreciate the joke. [Contrapoints](#) and [Clusterduck](#) prove that a progressive offensive in this arena is definitely on its way. Join them. Nothing is lost here.