"Las recomendaciones de los algoritmos nos están machacando"

The English original of the email interview with Geert Lovink by Martha
Cambronero for the Spanish revista contexto CTXT nr. 251 you can find
here. I really liked the questions and the dialogue.

Martha Cambronero: The Internet gurus predicted that social networks and
instant messaging applications would connect people and open up new
spaces for citizen collaboration. There are many cases of use of technologies
that have met that premise. However, we also see other unexpected effects,
such as the rise of a "preprogrammed sadness" caused by the architecture of
social networks, as you name it in your book *Sad by Design*. What exactly is
it? How can we detect it and reconfigure the digital spaces to neutralize it?

Geert Lovink: Let's distinguish between tools and totality. Social networks
can be tools to achieve common goals, to foster discussion and coordinate
tasks. We should get updates with a purpose. Against this pragmatic—if you
like, instrumentalist—point of view how we can communicate in our
everyday life, there is the messy platform reality in which we are pushed to
watch personalized adds, are swamped by newsfeeds we no longer identify
with, and receive updates from 'friends' we no longer have any connection
with. There's noise on all channels. We start to avoid work-related WhatsApp
groups. Why can't we unsubscribe from the useless family crap? Yours
friends get upset when you blocked them. This is how I imagine Hegelian
totality today. It is digital and unavoidable. 86584 unchecked messages, such
a drag. The apps surround and capture us. There are multiple ways to
respond to this pressure called 'information overload'. In my book, I
investigated on such feeling: sadness. This very common respond that arises
when we put the phone aside when it's all too much. We're down and out,
exhausted. The recommendations of algorithms have pushed us down. We're
stuck in the rabbit hole yet refuse to come out. You want to get angry, but
can't: at who, for what reason? The hand-held depression feel pathetic as we
cannot pinpoint the source of our digital discontent. This is why we reach
again for our phone—and text back.

MC: Another unexpected consequence of the inclusion of social networks in
everyday life has to do with the 'reputation economy.' Data is the 'new oil'.
On the one hand, we are cautious about what we say in public in case it ends

up affecting our future opportunities. On the other, everything we share in our online activity turns into raw material that feed the algorithms that predict what we want, even before we have realized that we want it. Do you think the social environment is being damaged, as stated by Tijmen Schep, one of the authors you referenced?

GL: Welcome to cybernetics age of permanent feedback. The thesis I made in *Sad by Design* is that we can no longer distinguish between social media and society. They are one and the same. I am saying that social life is damaged. Relationships become more cautious as people realize everything can and will be recorded—and ultimately shared. This leads to a potentially paranoid atmosphere that is dumbing down, no longer wild (unless you visit a dedicated zone specially arranged for that purpose). Tijmen Schep used the term 'social cooling' for this, meaning that if you are being watched, you're changing your behavior. We could also call this, with Adam Curtis, hyper-normalization. One could object and say, this has always been the case with media and technology; social norms are nothing new. However, what makes it different is the intimate and personalized way we are (in)formed. Smartphones and internet shape the subject as 'users'. We do not sense we're subjected to Power. Instead, we are challenged to empower ourselves. To say it with Deleuze, discipline comes from within. This, in turns, needs to be related to the 'crisis of the social'. Old ties have fallen apart, such as a tribe, family, church and neighborhood, and social media is not replacing them. Facebook is a banal version of the simulacrum Jean Baudrillard once described. It disappoints and is could be seen as a 'damaged' version of the social.

MC: There is a consequence of 'technification' that is not always receiving enough attention: the acceleration. One of the consequences of hyper-connectivity and process automation is that we can do more and more things in less time. This 'save time from the time' that we achieve thanks to the help of machines should allow us to relax. Nevertheless, it is leading us to an intensification of the rhythms of life that have dire consequences on emotions and mental health. What can we do to break this dynamic without having to give up being part of the system?

GL: I consider myself a pupil of the French philosopher of speed, Paul Virilio, particularly the conjunction of his work with that of Jean Baudrillard. Virilio was an urban planner and wrote his entire life about the collapse of space after the establishment of the global real-time regime. His main concerns

were the future of space. Already in the 1990s, my interest moved away from the metaphor of space (think of the Digital City project, our big community internet access project, here in Amsterdam) to effect of real-time on users in terms of the shrinking possibility to reflect, and to think in such technical, automated environments. Speed also affects social formations.

The 'accelerationists' are right that we should adjust and make better, strategic use of this new condition. We can come together more quickly, find out what other think and do, anywhere in the world. The current climate change actions are a good example of this. But we also have to think 'the accident' (as Virilio called it) and understand the implications what it means if we rise fast, but also disappear, at the same rate. Appearance and disappearance can be part of our game. We then have to know the rules of the game, and change them—if we can. Speeding up can be deadly, it is risky. What happens when speeding up has become the default? What is the fatal strategy here, to speak with Baudrillard? Can we develop theory in real-time? According to Virilio this is not possible. In the case of internet (critique) I have begged to differ with him but I do not have much to show for, especially not from a European perspective.

MC: In Spain, we have seen new technologies entering into schools. This is accompanied by a consensus on the need to learn through new interfaces such as the tablet and the whiteboard. Any cost is assumed to the point that schools are managing their ICT infrastructure with tools such as Google Suite that do not protect the privacy of young users. What happened to the critical perspective of technology and the defense of privacy? When did we lose it to the point of having today classrooms dependent on Google?

GL: The critical technology perspective you refer to was still alive in the 1980s but, by-and-large, disappeared in the neo-liberal era. In the shadow of the traumas of World War II and the 68 generation, many were openly against bio and gene technologies, nuclear power and nuclear weapons and population control by Big Brother and its mainframe computers. The attitude changed with the mass adaptation of personal computers. While collective experiences dwindled, the neo-liberal self (also called user) became prominent. We cannot use online services anymore without passing through the gate of the 'profile'. While the internet has empowered individuals, we also know that we cannot escape the golden cage. This has meant that no social movements have yet arisen that explicitly organize themselves to bring down 'platform capitalism'.

The lack of collective action has made it easy for Google to take control of the classroom. And as these are monopolies, there is no 'market' where 'better' products can compete with these giants. In addition, platforms present themselves as benevolent public facilities. As you can see there is much more to it than just 'privacy'. If we want to make an end to the data extraction economy or 'data robbery' behind our back, we need to not just dismantle the datacentres and ban the platforms but most of all understand that it is up to us, in Spain, in Europe, to build our own decentralized education software, based on public values. We tools that assist us, not centralized platforms.

MC: Technologies pre-configure reality. You explain this in your book, especially related to the architecture of social networks. However, in today's society, we welcome them as something that simply happens. The states, when driving the digital agenda, simply assume the Silicon Valley model. They do not show much interest in developing alternative political models that would put the people's life at the centre of the tech transformation. It was announced that in the Spanish region Aragón a new Amazon data centres will be opened. Nothing was said about the medium and long-term costs of this new infrastructure for the region. It is presented as a success in itself, as a popular multinational tech firm has chosen our territory over others. Is it convenient for Europe to deploy the Silicon Valley model? Are there already alternatives to this model? Can we create others?

GL: European elites have long excepted the internet supremacy of the United States in its common market, even in France. But this is not the case in every sector, think of Airbus, the car industry and telecommunications sector (Telefonica is the 8th largest in the world). So what has made the internet an exception? For this we need to go back to the 1990s, when the national politics (not Brussels) were preoccupied with privatization, including the national postal and telephones services. Most government experts and consultants did not see the rise of the internet coming and the conservative ruling class looked down on the stupidity, the 'notworking' of the early internet. On top of this, there was no startup culture as we know it now and no European alternatives to the ruthless venture-capital-backed hypergrowth-at-all-cost model. This is why we have so few 'unicorns' made in Europe. There are only a few pockets of resistence.

Barcelona is our Asterix and Obelix village resisting the Roman empire, where an odd mix of bureaucrats, politicians, geeks and activists are putting

'digital sovereignty' on the agenda. This initiative is an inspiration for many. However, this has not yet lead a socialization of infrastructure. We're still waiting for the roll-out a 'next generation' public internet. However, when global geo-politics shift, this is can happen almost overnight. After all, the systems run on code, and code can be rewritten. The discussion has yet to arrive at the point you are mentioning here: Should the (centralized) datacentre infrastructure be kept or rather dismantled? We're preaching decentralization everywhere but what does this mean in practice? The fact is, literally billions are using this infrastructure. What we can do, for instance, is to stop the silly routing of internet traffic via big nodes (of control) in the United States. Why should an email from Madrid to Valencia travel via the Bay area? We can redirect traffic, but this can only be a first symbolic measure.

MC: The political left seems to have abandoned the critical analysis of the hyper-mediation imposed by the screens and the dependency of people institutions on large technological companies. Is there any chance to open transformative and wide-ranging positions that reaffirm our agency on technology?

GL: The traditional left has been preoccupied with the demolition of the welfare state and the disappearance of the old-school working class. People are protesting austerity but the left still can't deal with the new forms of precarious labour (look at their ambivalent attitude towards Amazon, Airbnb, Uber, etc.). To face today's real existing living circumstances already seems to be too much: climate change, global geopolitics instead of American imperialism, a large army of young people that either has no work or face short-term contracts and the rise of 'identity politics'... and then, on top of all this, there's the internet, ruled by invisible, unknown tech guys and large companies in California. The problem here is the disconnect with the media world that we've known until recently, such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television. The internet doesn't fit in there. The confusing part here is that Google and Facebook are not producing any content and blatantly deny to have anything to do with journalism or news. This tactic, to hide between the infrastructure, is confusing the left up to this day. In turn, this is also making it impossible to name Silicon Valley's right-wing libertarian agenda that is hidden in their code, filters, protocols and investment strategies—including their systematic tax evasion by using offshore constructions.

MC: Many critical books have been published in 2019. Most of them focus on the level of individuals as the origin and the solution for opposing resistance and building alternatives to the big platforms monopoly. It can be seen, for instance, in the struggles for privacy where most of critics put all the responsibility of being protected on each user as an individual. How do you think we could emphasize more collective concerns about all these topics related to the dark effects of technology?

GL: It takes a while to see the problematic side of the constant emphasis of us as 'users'. The platform is taken for granted and is never questioned. It is entirely possible to reimagine new forms of social interaction that include a tech component. We should just make sure that our dialogues, discussions and coordination efforts cannot be appropriated by third parties. In order to get there we have to start building a 'digital commons' that is open yet secure and political yet funny. We should rely more on the social imagination of young people in this respect. We cannot only see them as passive victims of cruel platforms. However, we need to make steps to exit virtual reality and make changes in the real world. At some point, we need to expropriate what belongs to all and bring it into commons. This cannot happen without clear demands, forms of organization and a techno avant-garde that is willing to act.