Original English email exchange with Geert Lovink by Susana Picos for Librújula Magazine

Spanish version:
http://librujula.com/actualidad/2625-internet-esta-roto-otras-redes-sociales-son-posibles

Susana Picos: Is there a risk that what we experience as 'social' will be limited to 'social media'?

Geert Lovink: We are what we share. This is our consensual reality. We're no longer be able to distinguish between real and virtual communication with others. Social media ties are imaginative and strong, often more meaningful than family, school or the sports club. We may condemn this from a moral perspective but as a critic I do not subscribe to this. Both progressive and conservative forces have an interest to 'restore' the social and this blurs the view on the matter considerably. In *Sad by Design* I have chosen sides with the, mostly, young users that are immersed in the dirty reality of the all-consuming social media platforms. Moral policing doesn't help—I am saying that as an activist that works on social media alternatives. For almost a decade we have been arguing that the internet is broken and needs to be repaired: another social network is possible. This position does not imply that we have to go offline and return to family values, the trade union, political party, church and other institutions that dominated past centuries.

SP: Your book *Sad by Design* mentions that social media users believe they are opening themselves to the world. However, the opposite happens, they become more isolated. Are there any digital alternatives to social media that will not "disconnect" us?

GL: There are plenty of alternatives but none of them have reached the mainstream. How to scale up and get there is the key question. We Europeans have not yet been able to translate our fabulous 'social' values into the social media architectures. Instead, we left it to right-wing libertarian male geeks in California (steered by venture capitalists) to define our social life. For over two decades both commerce and politicians did not pay much attention to the internet. Now we're slowly waking up, specially after Brexit and Trump but people are already locked into existing services. Everyone is on their smart phone, and then the 'fake news' problem arives. Surprise, surprise. Politicians cry for regulation but don't really know where to start as Google and Facebook are not traditional media companies. Most

social media critics, like me, argue that regulation will be mostly symbolic and useless as they are fighting the last war. We need to go to the foundations, the protocols and standards.

SP: What does techno-sadness mean? How can we fight it?

GL: In the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandals several Silicon Valley 'dissidents' have stood up. They explained us in detail how 'behaviorial modifications' are influencing our mood. YouTube needs you to click on more extreme videos to keep you there. Users become anxious when they see how long their loved one did not respond. As Roland Barthes says: I am the one who waits. Compared to others, your ranking is low—and this makes you sad. All you do is follow. I am describing sadness as a shadow of the 'dopamine' moment, when we put the phone aside because we're exhausted. But then we got an alert and we're back. Did he respond?

I am not a techno-determinist and do think that (the removal of) technology will be the solution. It's not easy to fight unconcious systems that dominate our emotional life. Let's not pretend that it will be easy to delete the apps. We also need to understand that techno-sadness is part of larger trends in society such as loneliness, the artificial division between generations and social groups, racism and violence against women, depression and burn-out. "Yr Body is Nothing." Boy Harsher. We can no longer open our tired eyes.

SP: Why do you say that our reality more closely resembles a Victor Hugo novel than a Blade Runner film?

GL: We're not living in a cyberpunk sci-fi society. Where's my flying car? Instead, it looks more like a simulacrum of the 19th century, which was a time of rapid industrialization (now digitization) with a dull culture, dominated by a rapidly growing social inequality. Tech revolution and a conservative climate go hand in hand. In terms of social mobility we've seen major setbacks over the past thirty years. This are precisely the decades of the rise of the computer networks. Like Hugo, our vision is romantic, set in a stagnant everyday environment: that's what we see when we look at the Black Mirror episodes. The utopian technologies are almost all of them invisible. In response to dystopian measures we try address social causes yet get stuck in politically correct behavior and neo-liberal conventions. This is our regressive tragedy.

SP: What's the role of Europe when facing the two current Internet models:

the American, concentrating the power in the hands of a few, and the Chinese, which is completely surveilled by the government?

GL: Strictly speaking Europe is not a player. At best we're a market of 500 million consumers with an avarage spending power. We need to be humble about our current position. Remember, it was the Trump administration that unleashed the conflict with Huawei over the built-in surveillance software in their routers, not Brussels or Madrid. I still have to read the first report about the role of the EU in this. We're divided but most of all asleep. We may be proud of our GDPR but it a retrograde legal instrument that will not be able to break up monopolies and create a Euro-wide public internet space.

SP: Have we moved from gold diggers to data diggers?

GL: We've gone full circle and are back in the age of the gold diggers The name for bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies is 'digital gold': this also happens to be the title of the inside story of the first five years of bitcoin, written by Nathaniel Popper. I can recommend it to everyone as it perfectly documents the 'criminal energy' of the crypto scene. Please note that digital gold digging and data digging emerged around the same time. Both are pure alchemy: they magically turn computational cycles (using electricity) into money. Both are based on collective hallucination. We need to believe in data, as much as we need to believe in the value of crypto-currencies. Once we find out more about the price manipulations in the background and the extraction mechanisms of data (as described by Shoshana Zuboff), these schemes implode. Soon this will also be the case with the artificial intelligence hype that only seems to be able to operate in the dark with stolen data.

SP: Experts warn about the dangers of giving our data to platforms is not having any effect on the population. How can we make users aware of this reality?

GL: I doubt that awareness will make a difference. I left Facebook together with 50.000 others in 2010 as part of a first campaign that protested against their violation of privacy. This is a decade ago. We slept through the past decade and now wake up to find we're in a cage and can no longer escape. This is what happens with monopolies. Don't be surprised it happened. These giants can no longer be crippled by a change in consumer behaviour. The grip of Google and Facebook on Europe needs to be dealt with top-down. We can think of the socialization of cables and datacentres but most of all

have to remove them from the internet governance layers. We need to understand that they are political actors with an agenda, not engineers. This is the hardest step in the process to dismantle their power: the invisible presence of their values in code. Europe needs to be very firm as it is not an easy task to smash 'good intentions'.

SP: Is the answer simply to unplug?

GL: We need to master the technology, to speak with Peter Sloterdijk. Let's not portrail ourselves as victims. We Europeans should be able to respond and design alternative networks that do not gather data, that protect privacy and redistributes incomes. However, we have to say goodbye to free services. Nowadays, everyone knows the Silicon Valley matra: if you are not paying, you are the product. Let's not repeat it endlessly. We're willing to pay for Netflix and Spotify, now it 's time to understand that a subscription fee for social media will be part of the solution. Switching off your phone for the weekend will not make any difference. Stay Calm and Delete Facebook. Create your own networks, all the tools are at your disposal. It 's time to end the misery and act.