

Original here:

<https://art.art/blog/2020-the-year-mindful-digital-consumption-will-finally-trend-interview-with-media-theorist-geert-lovink/>. The interview was done via Skype.

By Daria Kravchuk and Maria Efimova (art.art)

You are known for your work on the negative psychological effects of Internet addiction, on the so-called «digital sadness» among the younger generation. What research is it based on?

Geert Lovink: I'm not a psychologist and I don't work in a hospital or a clinic. However, I visited an institution which works with addiction and spoke to its doctors recently. This was a very progressive clinic in Germany, which was founded in the late 70s with the idea of an anti-authoritarian approach towards addiction. There I had a chance to discuss the challenge that the medical community will need to address in the coming years – Internet addiction.

There is nothing about it in scientific medical discourse – yet. If we look at academic literature, we can see that video game addiction has been around for quite some time. There is a diagnosis and the first attempts of developing therapies. However, when we talk about Internet addiction in general, there is nothing. There are very clear indications that this problem might be causing a rise in suicide rate and burnout. Technical environments cause overload and exhaustion. I think technologically induced sadness, boredom and loneliness have become dominant today.

The intense use of smartphones 24/7 is beyond our imagination. Almost 4 billion people, the majority of humankind, have mobile phones and smartphones, or direct or indirect access to them. These are staggering numbers. We can say that not all of them are addicted, obviously. However, all of them are connected to a device and have a very strong emotional and personal attachment to it. What does that mean? Does this indicate the magnitude of the problem and the necessity to apply medicalization or should we look for other terms and metaphors? Because if I say, «you are sick», you can say «yes, but if I'm sick, you are sick too». And that leads me to the question of whether addiction treatment is the right approach.

What are the alternative ways of approaching this problem? And what should we do with these somber mental states? You refer to the

concept of inter-passivity in one of your books...

Inter-passivity is a term that was developed by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. It was then picked up and further elaborated on by Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller in the early 2000s in his essay «Inter-passivity fleeing from enjoyment, and the objective illusion».

The term combines the words «interactivity» and «passivity». It was a reflection on the paradigm of interactivity which was very popular in the 90s and is related to the rise of new media. In all this multimedia setups people were asked to push buttons, to respond and to choose, to browse, to surf etc. These were all new terms. And already in the late 90s it was clear that people were overwhelmed by the possibilities. Some of the interfaces were hidden and not very clear. Some of them were very seductive. The idea was that people could participate more instead of just watching passively like it used to be in the era of television and books, where there was no cybernetic feedback between the media and the user. Thus, a feedback mechanism was established, which was something completely new.

The concept of inter-passivity was established in response to that. It was the idea that people are fed up with giving feedback and being interactive, that they resist and don't want to participate. It's about a state of passivity, particularly cognitive or emotional passivity, enabled or facilitated by the appearance or potential of interactivity. I don't know exactly if this theory has become very popular, but today there are other forms of the same idea – what we call today European «offline romanticism». «Digital detox» is another and more contemporary expression for the same thing.

But does digital detox help? Or should we choose more conscious web consumption instead of just going offline?

The theory of inter-passivity is very psychoanalytic. Žižek and Pfaller were not working as interface designers, they were not working for Google and Facebook as network architects, maybe even unfortunately. Thus, inter-passivity has not really been integrated in the overall system designs. This is a problem, especially for young people who are heavily involved in digital life and don't have this kind of almost metaphysical point of view. But it is still important for them to have a point of view from outside of the system, outside of the social media, outside of themselves. The impossibility to take an outsider position is a serious restraint. And so if you are, like me, teaching thousands of students who have to design apps, who deal with

these things not only professionally, but also personally, emotionally, who are intimately intertwined with these media, you might have to reconsider the possibility of such an objective outsider position – because there is none.

When you think of such an outsider position it seems one might end up committing digital (and somewhat social) suicide. So then it's a question of how to find a balance between sustaining reasonable online presence and not falling a research victim to IT corporations.

Yes, people are now very well aware of the fact that they are becoming research objects. It would be interesting to dig further into this problem and that is what I am trying to do in my work. In fact, that will also at some point be a task for educators and doctors, for psychiatrists to deal with.

Right now, we have a very special responsibility. What are our alternatives? Do we have opportunities to implement them? Can we think together of different ways of designing information and communication environments?

Might there be some kind of «safe zones», digital spaces which would be more comfortable for users and make them feel less pushed to do certain things or buy certain products?

Let's find that out. We should create environments that will allow us to feel less addictive. I would be very much in favor of environments that are less addictive and more task-oriented, with more specific tools where you can say «okay, I am here for this or that purpose, to talk with these people about this topic and that is all». That would be conscious consumption of these technological environments. Now we are completely involved and at some point, we don't even know what the hell we are doing here. Like «what do I have in common with all those «friends»?

Yes, that is why .ART is trying to impose certain policies and reserve certain domain names for the right institutions and personalities, who can then use them for creating «safe zones».

Yes, that 's important. A domain today is a question of branding and identity. But traditionally, of course, it has also been a question of search-ability and find-ability. If I have never heard of this magazine or that art collection or whatever it is, but there's something in it that I trust, because there is an indicator, an identifier – a domain name – there I am, following it.

You mentioned the dangerous sides of the web. But what is your opinion on the idea of digitization of art and culture? Should we use the Internet as a global archive, as a database where we can store our cultural heritage?

We should preserve our cultural heritage creating long-term archives. I don't think that Google is an archive. You can try to find something that was there a week ago, but you will fail because it has disappeared. Many people place its hopes on Google, thinking that it is a serious partner. But I don't think so. It is a commercial company and they can either change their course radically or go bankrupt next week. This is what already happened many times, that is why creating archives of historically significant and valuable objects, events and information should become a matter of a social consensus.

What we can do is attract private companies. They are not going to do the archiving for us, but they can assist if properly stimulated. What can also help is a democratization of the process of web search. We should have a greater diversity of sources – it will be instrumental for democracy overall. Imagine if we only have one answer to a question? We don't want that. We need the multitude. We need different places where the information is stored.

A worrying trend that should be taken into account is the diminishing media literacy. Computer literacy has been rising in the last few decades, but we know that in the recent five years, especially among young people, it has been going down. Young people don't like to search anymore. That is worrisome. We need a culture of doing more and proper online research and more diverse results. If we don't manage that, we might as well stop the whole digitization process because why digitize if people don't search for information anymore?

Let's talk about the destiny of artists and creatives on the Internet. One of your main ideas is that the producers of content should be better protected and paid for what they do. Today, however, tech giants are the main beneficiaries of user-generated content. What can be done to change the situation?

I think that sooner or later we will cross the desert and reach the promised land, but now we are still in the 40-year wandering period. As an internet community we should leave behind what I call the economy of free content where everything by default has to be given away free of charge. In the

«promised land», as I see it, there is a peer-to-peer system in which producers are paid for the work they do and all the digital tools necessary for that are already in place.

The networks of information and communication will merge with those of finance, which means that an inevitable monetization and financialization of all data flows will take place. There are good and bad sides to the process but from the point of view of the creator this would be a completely new situation which allows one to earn a living by creating content. Artists, designers, writers and representatives of many other professions will benefit from the new system; they will ultimately be paid for their work. Because now the creative community is still a victim of the free software and open-source-software movement.

Nobody really talks about it, but it's a very interesting example – the move away from YouTube to Netflix. People do not see the Internet just as a huge telephone book or an archive. It's more of a 24/7 living environment. YouTube is a database and an archive, but it's losing to its streaming competitors. It's nice that you can easily access and look at something old for five minutes, but it's much more compelling to be part of an ongoing event, to be part of a series. That is why millions of people around the world pay for the content Netflix produces.

The new reality for creatives will also be linked to the rise of new payment systems like Bitcoin and Blockchain. Those cashless payment systems should also reach the artists and the cultural sector. Finally, people will be able to be paid and not be afraid that somebody will make a copy of their artwork by just putting it online.

Netflix is a great analogy. Will some kind of «streaming art» emerge too?

Yes. There are many roads that lead to Rome, so we should increase the diversity of technical experimentation. That will be a very strong incentive and a source of inspiration. The discussion of whether there should be an analogue of Netflix for independent artists and documentary filmmakers is already on. The same question applies to other art forms.