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This level of metaphysics ain't no shit

Interview with Geert Lovink by Bram Ieven

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Social organizing in times of social media has never been an easy task. But now that we are all sequestered in our own homes, in self- or state-imposed quarantine, the challenge of getting organized has suddenly gained an entirely new dimension. With virtually no space left for democratic debate and social activism except on online platforms, the role of social media in our public sphere has reached an entirely new level. And yet ours is a time that demands social activism and democratic debate. Throughout the globe we are witnessing how states and governments have taken far reaching actions to contain the crisis – and often through exceptional measures, by declaring the state of emergency and rule by decree. While many of these new regulations are necessary and understandable, the implications still need to be gauged.

So where does that leave us? Is this our future? What does that mean for social activism and for emancipatory democratic projects? Will they all need to adapt to this new online reality, which mostly seems to run over mainstream social media? Or can we think of some alternatives?

I had been wanting to do an interview with media theorist and net critic Geert Lovink for quite some time, as I believe he is one of the few media theorists who has something truly relevant to tell us about social organising after social media. It has been the focus of his most recent books. In [Sad by Design](#) (2019), Lovink argues that most social media platforms are induce a form of melancholy that leads to inaction, making emancipatory social activism virtually impossible. The ideal of community that social media pretend to provide clashes with the discontent and dissens they generate among there users. This is what Lovink calls *notworking*. Social media are unable or unwilling to turn that dissensus in a constructive force, one which would allow for effective social activism. And yet these social media are by now woven so deeply in our social infrastructure that social organising without social media (indeed, without media) is completely unthinkable.

The question then becomes: how can we use this networking of social media in a productive and activist manner? What kind of networked media would we need for this? That's the main question of [Organization After Social Media](#) by Lovink and Rossiter (2018). So early last week I had an online conversation with Geert Lovink to address all of these questions. We talk about his most recent work, about the challenges the current lockdown imposes upon us and about the role social media networks would play in how this crisis will unfold.

Bram Ieven: In the last couple of weeks we have all sequestered ourselves into self- or state-imposed quarantine. Most of our social interactions now run exclusively through social media platforms. In [Organization after Social Media](#), the book you co-authored with Ned Rossiter, you lamented that "media turned out to be empty containers, individualizing people rather than imagining collective agendas." What does it mean that we are now restricted to using individualized and individualizing media that seems singularly unable to construct any form of collective political imagination? What's your idea on that? What's going to happen the next few weeks or even months?

Geert Lovink: What we've seen in the first weeks of the corona lockdown is a mass introduction of streaming and video conferencing platforms; not just in education, but also at work and with family, friends and lovers. In short, our entire social life has been moved online in a way that is quite unprecedented. I think this is going to be beneficial for online organization and for the critique of social media platforms. Ordinary users finally have time to explore what else is going on beyond Facebook and Netflix. There's currently an oversupply of online apps and Instagram will definitely lose its lackluster.

But after an initial period of enthusiasm and exploration there usually follows boredom and conflict. We need to distinguish here between internal and external responses. Distraction, feelings of indifference, clicking and surfing and swiping without a cause might easily lead to a search for the extreme; a search for a virtual experience that borders on the physical. This is why experts warn for domestic violence.

In this situation, the online is a virtual realm where we, collectively, hide against this deadly virus. How long this will last is unknown at the moment. In a few more weeks, as state repression against those who defy the rules increases, the propped up social anger and desire might burst out onto the

streets; not in the orderly suburbs and gentrified inner cities, but in those places where the infected masses will have nothing to lose.

BI: What kind of politics does this leave us with? What are the challenges of post-platform social organizing in times of social distancing? What can we now do to counteract that individualizing tendency?

GL: We need to distinguish between the quarantine period itself and the time after. Those two periods will be very different. Right now, biopower speaks to us in a most intimate way. You can get infected, and you could die a most horrible way. The enemy we fight is invisible, much like radiation and today's air pollution, which is the topic of our first Adilkno book, [*Het beeldenrijk: over stralingsangst en ruimteverlangen*](#) (1985, in Dutch). What we do to overcome this fear is to radically isolate ourselves and no longer move (Paul Virilio's polar inertia). You can see this happening everywhere. Self-organization in neighborhoods, mutual aid, care systems that pop up out of nowhere. We are reaching out to others.

Social interaction doesn't stop just because the economy has come to a halt. Let's not believe in the myth that we are all isolated. If we all declare ourselves victims we cannot focus on those in real need. In terms of fighting the monopoly platforms, let's see how things play out. This is a time of shock. Things can change radically overnight. Needless to say we will not have solid European alternatives up and running overnight. However, what we can do is act swiftly when we see possibilities, such as in the Zoom specter, Houseparty for activists etc.

In general, we will need collaborative virtual environment that are safe, peer-to-peer, where we can get things done. We need to reclaim the internet as a public peer-to-peer infrastructure. We have said this time and again over the past decade, but now the general audience might be more open to these ideas, let's see.

BI: One of the opening lines of your latest book [*Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism*](#) (Pluto, 2019), reads: "Social media is reformatting our interior lives." That interior life, you further suggest, now mostly consists of micro-concerns that make our conception of self increasingly more fragile. How do you think that vulnerability and fragmentation already induced by social media is going to play out now that it is teaming up with a very real and practical sense of social isolation?

GL: During a state of exception like the 2020 corona virus crisis, we witness radical shortcuts, leaks and breakdowns in the techno-social psyche. See how celebrity culture responded: we should not think that the current isolation is particularly bad for everyone. Quite the opposite: life before was horrible, it was already unbearable and depressing for millions. As [Jamie Friedlander explained on Vice](#), "I have generalized anxiety disorder, but in times of true crisis, my anxiety seems to disappear." This can be an initial response. While [Slavoj Žižek, in his DIEM25 TV interview](#), rightly stressed that hiding at home is a possibility of the privileged (because they are neither homeless, refugee or working in vital professions), long-term isolation can indeed have devastating consequences for our mental health. The corona crisis did not make up poorer, we were already on the edge. In danger here are those who already suffer from depression, burnout and stress; in short, a substantial part of the current Western workforce. Some of them will be pushed over the cliff, resulting in an even further growing income inequality.

The never-ending repeating news flows—which are designed like that on purpose—only make matters worse. We scroll and swipe but there is no end to it all... if only we could have a break from the never-ending updates. Children, singles, kids in vulnerable domestic positions, the elderly... the list of vulnerable groups is steadily growing. But I am not a doctor or social worker. Over past years I have only looked at one specific detail, the technology-induced mental states and 'programmable' sadness in particular. Over the next period, many will experience first-hand that the way dominant social media have been designed, is to maximize profits by isolating users, exploiting their feelings such as sadness, anger and loneliness. Community tools have been dismantled and neglected, regardless of the PR talk. These are uncertain times for Silicon Valley. Officially, they embrace 'disruption'. Well, now they have it, the greatest disruption of social life since World War II. In their war rooms they will certainly discuss that things can go both ways: if they further fuck up and make this worse, nationalization and break-up is immanent. If they play the game in clever way, they will still have to choose: either bet on geopolitics and side with Trump, or speculate on a return of the interventionist globalist regime as under Clinton and Obama (their share prices have gone down considerably the advertisement market they depend on have all but collapsed).

BI: In *Sad by Design* you address this and coin it platform nihilism. One of the concerns, it seems, is the absence of the social outside of social media.

Contrary to what one might think, this could be catastrophic in times of social distancing.

GL: Unless we turn the table and re-invent social networks as tools for the wider good, we are indeed caught in an information cage that makes it hard, if not impossible, for us to unfold new forms of social interaction. Societies have been digitized and turned into vast personalized information machines. Social media keep us inside our bubble—for a purpose. This critique is now more than a decade all but nonetheless remains valid.

The thesis of my book is that we can no longer distinguish between telephone and society. This may sound like a nice, higher-level Hegelian synthesis but this takes the regressive stagnation we're in out of the picture. During luxury communism this may be ideal. But we're in an ugly phase of world history, in which a neo-liberal global regime without legitimacy and popular support has to compete, or merge, with rising nationalist agendas, dark forces that only accept particular parts of the neo-liberal agenda. These new rulers still would like have precarious workers on zero-hours contracts and the possibility to move their assets offshore.

We need to analyze this from the perspective of global capital that has become deeply entangled with drugs and real-estate mafia. Silicon Valley is no different. They are experts in moving around their profits and should for that reason alone be classified as corporate criminals and be punished accordingly. The role of The Netherlands in this is a particularly dark one, as it actively facilitates tax evasion and money laundering.

BI: At the centre of [Organization after Social Media](#) is the idea of organized networks (also known as *orgnet*). Simply put, an organized network is somewhere in between the self-organized, non-hierarchical but highly dispersive networks set up by activists (you reserve the name “tactical media” for this) and thoroughly institutionalized and hierarchical networks. Organized networks are trying to provide an organizational structure that takes the *notworking* of social media—that is to say their inability to facilitate any form of consensus or community and their tendency to produce disagreement—in a productive, indeed even constructive way. “Networks are ‘precarious’ and this vulnerability should be seen as both its strength and its weakness.” How could this play out now?

GL: If we approach this mechanically, like Benjamin Bratton's grandiose category of '[the stack](#)' and other, more Marxist constructs from the

accelerationist fraction, we simply say: your cute networks are out, our robust platforms have taken over, deal with it. Monopoly platforms are the New Normal. You decentralist anarchists lost out with all your rhizomatic dreaming. In times of a state of exception, there are more serious players. It is time for World History. Our critique comes too late. Technology is only now revealing itself as a real-existing planetary force and this level of metaphysics ain't no shit. The world has finally caught up with the philosophy of technology of 70 or more years ago.

I resist such cosmo-realist gestures. It may be good to think in 'Gaia' terms when it comes climate change but when it comes to technology this is a bad idea, with devastating consequences. When analyzing a situation it may be good to think in those terms, but its politics are disastrous. Scaling up may be nice, but who will be in charge of the code, the protocols? There is no United Nation at that level. Maybe on a very broad regulatory level there might be such a thing, but technology will always be embedded, local, material, dirty, and never really working.

Let's stay alert and see that technologies, no matter how 'good' and 'global', are always owned and controlled by particular companies, nation states, ethnic groups and mafia structures. There may be planetary protocols but no global infrastructure, owned and run by altruistic engineers that work for the common good. Perhaps I am not reading enough science fiction. Let's see who the winners will be of the Covid-19 crisis (to use the politically correct scientific term).

This all reminds me of the late John-Perry Barlow, bohemian cowboy, EFF co-founder and lyricist of the Grateful Dead. He staged an unannounced appearance in the Amsteam hippie-temple [Paradiso](#) during the second [Next 5 Minutes in January 1996](#). He not only talked to Richard Barbrook about the '[Californian Ideology](#)' but also gave an interview there for VPRO television in which he, in his own very poetic way, describes how cyberspace was connecting each and every synapse of all citizens on the planet. Apart from the so-called last billion we're there now. This is what we can all agree on. The corona crisis is the first Event in World History where the internet does not merely play 'a role'-the Event coincides with the Net. There's a deep irony to this. The virus and the network... sigh, that's an old trope, right?

To conclude, as a concept the networks can and should be salvaged from this mess. I'd hate to see humankind having to go back to older and failed social formations such as the tribe, the church, the village or the (communist)

political party for that matter. We need to further explore the inclusive and diversified aspects of the network.