I am proud to announce the publication of my first Chinese translation: *Social Media Abyss* from 2016, originally published in English by Polity Press, with other translations in Italian, German, Russian and Spanish. The book is published by the Institute of Network Society, which is part of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. I would like to thank Huang SunQuan, director of the Institute of Network Society, for all his efforts to realize this publication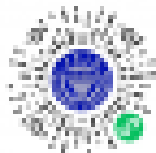. More on the book and how to order it you can find here: https://www.caa-ins.org/archives/7124. There is also a mobile edition:

社交媒体深渊：批判的互联网文化与否定之
力

恨时抢购价

¥ 43.50
活动结束价：¥58.00

Below the introduction to the Chinese edition:

From Interaction to Transaction

By Geert Lovink

"When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become

an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; a culture-death is a clear possibility." Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985)

"We will need to construct a systematic organological approach to overcome dichotomies such as human/machine, vitalism/mechanism, and to do this we will have to go back to cybernetics." Yuk Hui, *Contigency and Recursivity* (2019)

This first translation of my work into Chinese is dedicated to Ilya Eric Lee, my passionate Taiwanese 'tactical media' friend and co-activist who passed away in May 2019 because of complications from cellulitis. The cause was a small wound due to a bicycle accident on his leg, a few months earlier. Ilya insisted on a traditional Chinese medicine treatment but a few months later the wound suddenly got worse. When he visited a Chinese doctor he got hit by a heart failure and passed away on the way to the hospital. Days after his sudden death, British artist Graham Harwood wrote on the nettime list: "I'm not sure how Ilya's idiosyncratic, strange, funny and generous thought processes managed it, but he glued together a carnival of like-minded misfits around the world, adding to their nutzo projects, like YoHa's Plastic Raft of Lampedusa. He gave many of us a version of what globalisation, transnationalism could mean in opposition to the fragmentary version we are fed with our processed foods."

I must have met Ilya for the first time during my first visit to Taiwan in late

1998 while traveling from Tokyo with Toshiya Ueno. Next he came over for his life-changing visit to the third *Next Five Minutes* festival in Amsterdam in May 1999, amidst furious debates about the dynamics inside and between cultural networks, the role of networks in the Kosovo war, European digital culture policy debates, cyberfeminism, streaming technologies and the tactical relations between old and new media and the principles of net.art. These encounters prepared the ground for my longer visit in late 1999, in the aftermath of the earthquake, a moving media activism trip, documented in my book *Dark Fiber* (MIT Press, 2002).

During our friendship over the following two decades, we passionately discussed media strategies, regardless of the context of contemporary arts, as well as media activism, policy blues and his struggles with the ministry of culture, his long involvement with Academia Sinica and the perils of the Taiwanese start-up scene. Ilya never tired of believing that cultural exchanges were not only vital but would eventually also result in a thriving, diverse media culture that would be open to experiments with digital technologies for social change.

The last time I worked with Ilya was in May 2018, when he returned, again, to Amsterdam. He brought a small crew over for the *Flying Money* conference our Institute of Network Cultures (INC) organized with the City of Amsterdam to tackle the rise of cryptocurrencies and the illicit money flows in this small but global place. The question we posed was an old one: how can activists, artists, researchers and policy makers come together and actually make a difference, to not just witness and critique but take action and shape a common future? In my office we taped an interview on the magic of INC, as Ilya wrote me in an email, "from *Critical Point of View* on Wikipedia research, all the way to *Flying Money*, and its over-production and uniqueness, totally your creation, and the Amsterdam cultural roots (Digital City/Waag/xs4all), in which context it belongs." (May 25, 2018)

Lately Ilya worked on what he called 'comparative global culture lab studies' with Professor Huang Sunquan. For a while they both commuted between the Taiwan cultural policy scene and the newly founded Institute of Network Society, a small unit inside the prestigious China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. Ilya arrived in Amsterdam with a straight question: What could a tactical 'culture lab' be beyond the vast institutional examples such as MIT MediaLab and Ars Electronica? One of the last events Ilya co-organized was the *Urban Fabric* conference. With limited resources it brought over Rob van

Kranenburg (Internet of Things Council) and Frederico, Jaromil and Aspasia of dyne.org (Amsterdam) who gave workshop on 'dowse' and 'social wallets'. Seb Chan ACMI/ Melbourne), Ilya's Culturemondo network, Rob Kitchin (Programmable City), and Ned Rossiter (Sydney) also joined. Graham Harwood finished his nettime memories with the following words: "Ilya was a romantic and I both saw him struggle with being on his own and then it was my privilege to see him seek out love, follow it around the world and finally find it in his and his partner's garden, growing more food for the future. Ilya was our friend, eating companion, glue in a world that tries to keep us separate."

It was Ilya who, in mid 2016, initiated this translation of *Social Media Abyss* (Polity Press, 2016) and arranged the contract. I had finished the manuscript late in 2015 and sent Ilya the manuscript. The deal was sealed when I came over to Hangzhou for the Network Society conference in November 2016 at the China Academy of Art. After the event I travelled to Taipei with Ilya for talks and meetings. *Social Media Abyss* is a special book in this personal context as it was the first volume of writing to come out after I survived a cardiac arrest in Amsterdam in January 2012. The ambulance arrived within minutes and the nearby OLVG hospital, on the other side of Oosterpark, where I was born and had an earlier open heart surgery, acted resolutely. After this I quit my second job at Mediastudies, University of Amsterdam and we bought a small summer house in centre of France (where I am writing this preface). This study, my second book with Polity, and the fifth in my 'critical internet cultures' series, summarized the three years after my recovery.

The title of the book refers to the famous Nietzsche quote "When you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." *Social Media Abyss* plunges into the paradoxical condition of the New Digital Normal versus a lived state of emergency. There was a heightened, post-Snowden awareness—we know we are under surveillance but we continue as if it doesn't matter. Despite the privacy incursions of companies like Facebook, Google and Amazon, social media use continued to be an activity that cultivated daily habits, having moved to smart phones that accompany us during our busy lives. We are thrown between addiction anxiety and subliminal, obsessive use. Our thumbs grow and necks bend. Meanwhile, social dislocation is amplified as we dive into the techno-abyss of self-absorption, lonely and bored, dulled and indifferent. The strategic question the book posed was the following: Where does art, culture and criticism go

when the digital vanishes into the background?

Social Media Abyss summarizes the (post-)austerity years in which social media platforms established their hegemony. Chapters on the literary net criticism of Jonathan Franzen and the Uganda travelogue (and its *i-network* story) are vital for my understanding of a broad definition of digital culture that goes beyond the geek imagination (and its critique) and arrogant monopoly power of the tech giants. The programmatic essay of the book would be 'What's the Social in Social Media'. The background of this text, that cries out for a second part, is the pairing of the conscious limiting of interpersonal and community tools in platforms and the continuing intellectual poverty in academia and outside, to deal with this hegemonic, techno-driven version of 'the social'.

If social media define our relationships, then who is our Durkheim or Comte? Where is sociology now that we urgently need to study 'the social'? The article describes the decline of virtual communities on bulletin boards, in forums, MOOs and lists, in favor of a profile-centric Web 2.0/blog culture that morphed into centralized social media platforms. Why is 'the internet' today reduced to a set of legal 'privacy' questions, studied by bureaucratic social science academics obsessed with quantitative analyses? Unwillingly—or not—their 'dataism' has resulted in a shift of the focus towards 'consequences' that had to be regulated in an attempt to push the weird, speculative, political and aesthetic imaginations on possible futures aside.

For the past decade Internet criticism has been reduced to the necessary and never-ending 'critique of social media'. In late 2018 I finished the next study, volume six, called *Sad by Design*, which continues this line of critical social media research in the aftermath of Trump, Brexit and Cambridge Analytica. My emphasis had by then shifted to the long-term impact of network media and the society of inspection. However, the real contribution of *Social Media Abyss* lies in the three essays on the hegemony of the 'free', the rise of crypto-currencies after 2008 and the debates on digital money and internet revenue models.

Are we ever going to get some money back after decades of uploading our common wealth for the data economy? When is the global refusal to participate in Silicon Valley's invisible extraction schemes finally going to reach a critical mass? As I state early in the book, I have been with this topic ever since the early-mid nineties when the Californian regime of the 'free'

was established. Coders may have to be paid as they fulfill vital tasks to maintain systems and networks, but all the rest, apart from a handful of founders of the start-up/dotcom era, are supposed to contribute to the 'wealth of the network' for free. This was proposed as 'inevitable', the planet's destiny. We had no choice. As the Net rapidly grew, and started to become inseparable from the larger neo-liberal 'precarity' context, contradictions started to become explosive in the post-global financial years after 2008—precisely the moment of the launch of bitcoin. Just as there is no global financial system with unified rules, nor is there one road that leads to monetization and a redistribution of wealth.

The situation in China might be different, with WeChat, Taobao, and peer-to-peer payment systems such as Alipay. But this can also be said of Africa with mobile money transfer services such as M-Pesa or contact-less payments with cards in Russia and parts of Europe. Not everyone is interested in all the techno-avant-garde art works, blockchain debates during conferences and on social media, formalized in start-ups and their 'white papers'. It remains to be seen whether or not the huge Chinese experiment in managing populations through social credit systems, pervasive surveillance and the cultivation of social anxiety becomes an export model to the rest of the world. While the digital and material infrastructural foundations for imperial expansion are laid with the Belt & Road Initiative, it's worth remembering that the unruliness of the social tends to unravel templates of control.

From the internet as global workplace perspective, it is important to stress the diversity of experiments and their underlying network architecture premises. Crowdfunding may be as important as trials with universal basic income, distributed forms of care, collective funds to insure freelancers, local co-ops instead global monopoly players such as Airbnb or Uber. The move from decentralized networks to centralized platforms, necessary to reach an economy of scale among customers (previously known as 'users' or, even more rare, 'citizens'), comes with a high price: will peer-to-peer exchanges remain in charge for their financial sovereignty or will we create, again, large financial institutions such as banks and credit card firms? As American crypto-engineer Enim Gun Sirer puts it: "The whole point of cryptocurrencies is to put you in charge. Not the state, not some jackass who came late with lots of money, not some guy who built a giant space heater, but you." The libertarian crypto-religion may lead to a self-centered universe in which users are held fully responsible for their own assets, without having

sufficient technical training and alertness to act when necessary. As one of the Reddit posters says: "This is crypto—YOU are the bank. It is 100% your fault, you should have researched how to safely use the tech. It has nothing to do with the development stage. Either take the moment to learn, or yeah, leave."

If nation states are about to lose their monopoly on money, who will take over and what happens to these large commercial platforms in times of economic recession? Early tech imaginaries of geeks, and related debates, are remarkably informative, and will shape the discursive field for decades to come. Anarcho-capitalists and populist right-wing gurus that preach financial autonomy (while engaged in pump 'n' dump schemes that fool ignorant outsiders) may be marginal in comparison with futures markets, forex trade or high-frequency trading but what about corporate elites that make use of sophisticated digital money tools to move assets to tax havens? And how does this relate to small yet vital payments small farmers, shop owners and traders receive on a daily basis and that are lured into this or that payment system? The fact is, information and social relations are already deep into the process of 'financialization'—quite possibly for the right reasons. The internet is no longer a parallel 'cyberspace' filled with weird 'virtual' creatures named avatars and flying data objects, but has been an integral part that coordinates our economic and social life for many years. *Social Media Abyss* is a testimony of the internet's early adult years, when its shape was still unclear and being imaginatively designed by weird adolescent dreams that were becoming, indeed, very powerful. These dreams have not left our world yet.

(August 2019)