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Juan Íñigo: In a recent article you talked to several theorists about "zoom fatigue," a term that has become popular lately. What makes a video conference so demanding and psychologically exhausting during covid?

Geert Lovink: Video conferencing has quickly become the dominant internet condition, with social media in its familiar co-starring role as 'second screen' distractor. In this initial phase of mass adaptation, video calls take up all our attention. Zoom, Teams and all the rest are not yet part of the mediascapes that run in the background, as information noise, the way we're utilizing radio and television (but also podcast). Early webcam culture such as JennyCam emphasized environmental awareness over the direct communicative messaging of the phone call. We can compare video calls with the centrality of the radio set in the living room during the 1930s and 40s, a position which was taken over by the television set in the 1950s and 60s, sitting in a chair, in front of the magic device. His Masters Voice. Let's also signal that students are the first to rebel against the disciplinary claims to sit still in front of the webcam by massively switching off their cameras. However, this is not possible in the work situation. What makes current video set up so demanding is precisely its ongoing demand for our attention. The interface design tires our eyes. Intuitively, the subconscious focus remains on our self-image. Apart from the occasional PowerPoint presentation, here is the action? We look and look but can't really find the centre of our attention.

JI: Byung-Chul Han proposed that we no longer live in a disciplinary society but one defined by performance. Do you think the pandemic has confirmed his diagnosis?

GL: This is evidently true, and the required ongoing performance inevitably leads to a breakdown. It is this passive, muted performativity that's so exhausting. Generations grew up with the participation, interaction and performance imperatives but post 2019 that has been replaced by a new regime of productivity of the few and a desperate form of indolence of the many. From the beginning, I was a sceptic of the idea of the possible benefits of reflection. We're in a state of hovering above the abyss. Now that even the bullshit jobs are rapidly disappearing new cultures of conformity are on the rise. Under covid, creativity and the arts are the last things that

are in demand. New jobs are supposed to be created within the 'reset' framework of green economies and AI, set within the limited geopolitical enclosures of today. The idea of cosmopolitan globalization seems a remote utopia. With the onset of the covid-induced 'stack of crises' (economic, social, mental health-wise, ecological), I am no longer sure if the individual destiny is going to depend on performance. The market-driven neoliberalism has suffered too much legitimacy lately. Instead, we can expect a collective-reactionary, corporatist belief system to emerge.

JI: What do you think of online classes where constant attention and deep reading skills are required but in a context of widespread digital distractions?

GL: True, reading of long, complex and layered books requires a lot of discipline these days. This was different in the past when only elite members (most white, young males) were getting a higher education. It seems that after its democratization the university had a few decades in which it still tried to maintain old reading standards but they were quickly lost, not only because of the distractions of 'new media' but also because jobs demanded flexibility, multi-tasking and life-long learning. There are also cultural differences, still, with central and eastern Europe and Russia still having a focus on reading classics in literature and philosophy in the teenage years.

The focus switched to latest findings instead of the deep insights and encyclopedic knowledge of the canon, built-up over centuries. Today's scientific output in the form of peer-reviewed journal articles reflects this. Search engines and Wikipedia are taking care of automated retention. It seems as if the monograph stems from another age, in the same way as my generation already had trouble reading iambic poetry. Only a selected group of students and intellectuals, worldwide, actually reads comprehensive studies, and this reflected in the sales numbers. What we see happening is the development, circulation and reception of smaller knowledge chunks that condensate in concepts, abstracts, pop articles, memes, maps—and interviews like these. Information circulate faster, in smaller chunks.

A close reading of complex materials will have to be done, literary elsewhere, offline, in libraries. This requires real dedication and concentration skills, but most of all, free time. It would be fantastic if the attention/retention crisis was temporary and next generations could freely dive into Adorno and Heidegger, reading it on their devices, in the metro or the café. This would likely only work if these works are perceived sexy–and

there is an urgency to read Ahrendt and Sontag (or any other of your heroes). Luckily, Nietzsche can be read in any circumstance. There will always be a curiosity and eagerness to think… We're just in a period of transition, leaving behind the Gutenberg galaxy, as McLuhan rightly framed it.

JI: Some have seen in the possibility of working and studying online and from home an element of comfort that they are not willing to leave behind. Is it a problem of the social network or of a neoliberal and hyper-accelerated lifestyle?

GL: This is not a tech problem but one of urban planning. We hear about the expected decline in the need for office spaces but not about the crisis of space in people's home. Who can afford to have a separate study where you read and make calls, not disturbing others? Let's not even talk about all those professions that simply cannot be done from home, like hospitality, cleaning, factory work, delivery jobs. I am in favour of the closure of all open office plans and the building of 'the room of one's own'. If there is enough office space, why not? More square meters will immediately pay off with greater focus and a higher quality of work.

JI: In *The Anatomy of Zoom Fatigue* you suggest that platforms like Zoom make possible new modes of surveillance modes.

GL: Sure, Teams and Zoom are the opposite of peer-to-peer networks such as torrents. Surveillance is a business model, data is gathered and sold to third parties, including government agencies. But apart from that, the surveillance is also happening inside communities and companies. Do not underestimate the peer pressure to conform, shut up, dress nicely, hide your surroundings.

JI: In your book *Sad by Design* you state there is overwhelming evidence that today's sadness and anxiety are programmed by design. Could you give some examples (Snapchat; WhatsApp)? How have these emotional states been enhanced due to covid?

GL: When we post something on Instagram we're curious to find out how many likes it got. On WhatsApp, we need to go back there to see if the other has read the message (and when). The updates in Facebook's timeline are addictive for many and on Twitter, we return to read the latest news, even if we were there a few minutes ago. There's another funny meme on Reddit. I

am waiting for a response on Signal but there is nothing yet. And how the good old 'get mail' button you click on the entire time? Fear of missing out can be real if you're desperate to find work on LinkedIn or feel horny and need to find a date, right now, on Tinder. These are the perils of real-time communication. Imagine all these apps would only deliver their information once a day.

JI: Considering the important 'curatorial' element of life online, can we 'train' or manipulate the algorithm to reduce the escalations of post-dopamine stress and anxiety that we experience when we are online?

GL: Resolutely, no. Users have no say in this. We're pure subjects and should not be naïve to believe that we can somehow steer or democratize platform capitalism. Social media today are not public services. What we can demand is that are legally categorized as 'media', but Silicon Valley vehemently insists their neutrality as 'tech' firms. We should take away this illusion. At the moment there's talk about an anti-trust breakup but the tech versus media definition is a more fundamental issue. What we also can demand is to decommission and disassemble certain algorithms and APIs. As we're dealing here with online black boxes and offline AI systems where extracted data are being processed to create new differences we need to be very specific as companies can do whatever once data are taken offline. Data extraction is the core problem. This is why some of us have been arguing for a privacy by design 'data prevention' approach.

JI: According to Slavoj Žižek, identity politics have induced a state of generalized "relativism". Considering the state of exhaustion and digital nihilism that you describe in your book, what benefit do the giants of the attention economy get from the "identity" approach?

GL: This important issue is not about good or bad, pro or contra capitalism but about specific business models that have become hegemonic and cannot be questioned. The profile-centric 'identity' approach in social media design is the technical apriori of the add-driven economy of the free. Without 'identity' there are no personalized adds and thus no Facebook or Google as this remains their main form income (and profit). Of course, there are other revenue models possible, as the game industry shows, with, for instance, subscriptions, in which users remain anonymous, wear 'masks' or use pseudonyms. In another essay I wrote for Eurozine on cancel culture, *Delete Your Profile, Not Others*, I point at the dark role social media are playing in the mass deletion/unfollowing of suspects without addressing the structural

elements of the violence. I see them as herd gestures without a cause. No more policing of boundaries. I stick here to the 1980s refusal of identity as something only cops ask for. Identity fluidity ultimately aims to overcome identity itself. In fact, there is a surprising consensus about this amongst activists.

JI: Many have criticized selfies as an expression of the "narcissism" of the so-called "generation me". However, you see in them a "negotiation" and a "survival strategy" that young people do under harsh neoliberal conditions. What is your diagnosis regarding its use? Have you noticed, in times of pandemic, new "survival strategies" linked to the selfie?

GL: The ambiguous play with the photogenic self has a liberating aspect and is, at the same time, a ruthless self-promotion tool in the neo-liberal fight for survival over resources, grants, reputation, favours, including friends, lovers and partners, out there on the market place called life. I am doubtful if under the post-2019 regime these techniques of the (online) self are still effective. We see that relations are no longer static and literally start to dance—on TikTok and Snapchat. This makes it possible for humour and the absurd to enter the game.

JI: Some recommend "digital detoxification" strategies or who propose a post-pandemic return to a simpler offline way of life. Does it make any sense to abandon, or at least take a break, from social media? Or is the digitalization of life and work something that is here to stay?

GL: We all take a break, no matter how small, depending on personal and financial possibilities. But there is also the unwanted 'permanent vacation' (a condition I lived under for nine years from 1983-1992). We need to talk about this as we're in a new wave of mass unemployment in this (post-)covid period. Creative and bullshit jobs were the first to go out and with this 'precarity' is now no longer an accurate description: it is now straight-out poverty. Remember, until 2019 freelancing, working for Uber, renting out a room to Airbnb were still seen as acceptable options (albeit bad ones). The same also applies to the offline break. Let's celebrate it as a holiday and not be too therapeutic about it. The best thing for humanity would be to outgrow the smartphone, as quickly as possible. Tech sovereignty for me also means that we outgrow the medium and treat like a vacuum cleaner or a mixer. Perhaps I altered my position lately. I now fear more the moralism, the pedantic educative gesture of those in power that know best what's good for the young people. I remain optimistic. Our device: we are not sick. Under the

current platform logic we're not only incalculable but also impossible to cure. One day soon, rebels will completely ignore social media. This is Zuckerberg's worst nightmare: when people forget Facebook.

JI: What is the risk of medicalizing our contemporary virtual condition? What do these speeches usually omit?

GL: I am not working in the insurance industry and do not think in terms of 'risk'. The last thing would be to portray smart phones and social media apps as seductive secret objects of desire that authorities want to take away, for 'public health' reasons. Social media is not the new smoking. We need to politicize the situation, nor argue for therapies. We're in this with 3.8 billion people (tendency: rising). I firmly believe in the right to communicate, whisper, gossip, complain. The 'addictive' part of social media can easily be dismantled and is, again, related to the underlying business model of the free. Cut the tie between social media and advertisements. Fire the behavioral scientists, cut ties with neuro-science, and the world suddenly looks a different place. Introduce paid subscription, automate peer-to-peer payment systems. Instead of optimizing the 'user experience', more censorship and filtering in the name of pedagogical 'recommendation', we need to open up the landscape and design social tools, no longer based on user profiles, updates, 'friends' and likes. Learning from Evgeny Morozov means not expecting technology to resolve our societal problems. Social networks should be repurposed as self-organization tools that can address both socio-economic, race, gender and ecological struggles. And, yes, class struggles, with the aim to redistribute global wealth. Platform capitalism merely creates a hand-full of (right-wing libertarian) billionaires. We urgently need decentralized, self-organized markets, community tools, not extractive platforms, owned and manipulated by the few.

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