

Interview with Geert Lovink by Annarita Briganti

For La Repubblica, May 31, 2021

Italian online version:

https://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2021/06/08/news/geert_lovink_viaggio_nell_o_stress_da_iperconnessione_la_tecno-tristezza_si_verifica_quando_e_tutto_troppo_e_dobbiamo_smet-304844326/

Italian version as pdf: [Lovink interview 06_08_21](#)

Original English email version:

Annarita Briganti: What are Zoom fatigue and techno sadness?

Geert Lovink: In 2019 the Italian translation *Nichilismo digitale* came out with Bocconi Editore in which I wrote about 'sad by design', a more precise book title, in my humble opinion, but alas. On social media, not just information ('fake news'), our moods are 'finetuned'. I am talking specifically about the flat feeling of exhaustion we feel after a long session of checking Facebook, Snapchat, Insta, WhatsApp or TikTok, looking for a YouTube video and then back to Twitter. Techno-sadness occurs when it's all too much and we have to stop, putting the phone away. But then we pick it up again because dozens of new messages arrived. We know that this type of never-ending exhaustion has been designed. Social media can also be programmed differently but the platform giants have modified their systems in such a way that we really need to check those latest updates. These behavioural changes have been known for at least five or so years.

Then, in early 2020, the Brexit-Trump social media tinkering suddenly ran into Corona-induced lockdown measures. Hundreds of millions had to stay home and improvise, working from their kitchen or bedroom. Zoom fatigue is not directed related to sadness, anger or loneliness. What connects the two is structural tiredness. We can't bear to watch the screen anymore, but we have to. Zoom is designed in such a way that we constantly check our own image. In response, especially young people started to switch off their camera's. On our website, you can read the essay Teaching into the Void by Donatella Della Ratta (JCU) in which she investigates the reasons for this passive resistance.

AB: Is this Covid's fault or are we being manipulated? Or both?

GL: Covid is a virus and I am curious how we can blame a virus. The only thing we could ask is: can we thank Chinese authorities for this 'experiment' or was it merely a covered up 'accident'? Millions died, many more suffered and dropped further under poverty levels. As soon as we start to add up meta entities like China plus Facebook plus climate change, we'll quickly end up at the level of conspiracy theories. Let's not go there and focus on what we can do, what free and open tools can enable public education that is more participatory than the passive platforms like Zoom and Teams. Let's combine working in smaller groups and not expect a quick and out-of-the-box technical solution for extraordinary situations. In terms of internet alternatives to platform capitalism, I do not see that the Covid period has brought us anything much apart from more dependency and addiction, more boredom. Let's, first of all, celebrate that we're alive, that we made it, and leave behind this horrible period.

AB: How can we get rid of hyperconnected stress?

GL: I do not believe in individual therapy or digital detox as a weekend course in the countryside. We need to 'collectivize' the problem. This can be done on multiple levels, simultaneously. Regulating Silicon Valley won't help. This is not a 'privacy' problem that can be fixed by lawyers. Billions of euros fines will not impress these giants. We a step by step plan to reduce and then eliminate the influences of platforms. In the beginning, we will argue a lot about chicken-egg problems. At what point do we need working European alternatives? We got Telegram and Signal as alternatives for WhatsApp and Duckduckgo as reasonable alternative for the Google search engines. There are more examples like this but not for all services yet. As Brussels and national governments have not done anything to reduce our dependency on Silicon Valley this will take some time. We also need to focus on what needs to be centralized and what should be done locally. And what should become part of the public digital infrastructure? There is still the dream of federated, decentralized networks but I have to admit that we did not deliver over the past decade at this point. The radical opposition has been too weak when it comes to building viable alternatives.

AB: What has technology given us and what has it taken away from us? What's on the balance sheet? Do we live a better life, or worse?

GL: We communicate more, and faster, search and find more stuff and

depend less on traditional structures such as the family, friends, the village, work, trade unions or the church. There is a growing sense that there are alternatives out there but how can we find them? And how can they scale? It all feels like a gamble. Do we have enough online skills to overcome the new confinements? This can only be answered retrospectively. In the larger picture tech is not playing a decisive role.

AB: Will working from home remain the norm? Will it be necessary to regulate this?

GL: At home, we pay the rent for our own office—and we are supposed to foot the bill. While for some working from home may have been beneficial, it is my impression that it's been exhausting for many. In many cases, women had to stay home and mind the children. Staying home was obligatory in many professions so it's hard to, respectively, ask people whether they liked it. They had no choice. Let's hope they went on a subtle, invisible strike. From what I've heard, people worked harder and made more hours, especially in education. We should not only have demanded the obligatory ergonomic chair but bigger apartments with separate workrooms for each member of the household! With faster, cheaper internet. In professions like healthcare, food and delivery workers had to be on the road anyway.

Early on, experts predicted that office spaces were going to be closed to save costs. But this is nothing new. The era of the open office floor plan with flexible desks was already over. Because of crowded and badly ventilated environments workers were already implicitly told to stay home. Why bother to sit there with your noise cancellation headphones, trying to concentrate while others next to you are even more distracted than you? Needless to say that in such tense situations it is hard to show solidarity and organize discontent.

AB: What's your digital diet?

GL: There are many diets, not one, and some of us try them all, one of the other. I personally do not use Facebook and Google products (as much as that's possible anyway) and hardly have apps installed on my phone. As some noticed I do use Twitter and consult it, and contribute to it once or twice times a day. I have turned off notifications, which introduces weird communications patterns as it makes online dialogues more random. That's what happens when we ignore the real-time regime. My advice is to delete a lot and make new beginnings. If a source or medium really speaks to you, it

will reappear, even after you deleted it.

AB: What do you think of social audio like Clubhouse, which, in Italy, is now in a crisis after a boom in recent months?

GL: I nearly joined Clubhouse but then refrained from it after I read more about its background. The venture capital-driven start-up culture in the Bay Area seems unable to reinvent itself. The Clubhouse business model is the same as it ever was: secretive data extraction. We know where this ends. However, from the perspective of free radio, streaming media and podcasting the Clubhouse offers an interesting model that we should further revolutionize. The shielded club or tribe that gathers and then self-destructs its content is a logical consequence of the cynical strategy of the large platforms where we're required to act out in the open and form easy prey for advertisers, content moderators, police and secret services. We need to take the design of closed communities again into our own hands.

AB: Will we fall in love with a robot in the future? It's a serious question, it's not a joke.

GL: I understand, but there is no direct link for me between the internet and robots, they can perfectly function autonomously, offline. Professionally speaking I try to stay away from topics like automation, artificial intelligence and big data and focus on internet culture. That's already big enough. However, I understand the existential despair in your sincere question. In my context, I prefer to talk about bots, text bots, not so much about the physical servants or slaves, packed with AI. So many of us have been lonely over the past year or more. Even when we believe that we deal with real people on the net and the socials, there's already a latent uncertainty. Is Annarita Briganti an AI employed by La Repubblica to save costs? Am I making use of GTP-3 writing software to formulate the answers to this email interview? You tell me. What happens next when taking this exchange to a dating site and engage with each other there? Who would not get confused?

AB: How do you see the future? We'll make it? What's your definition of present and future?

GL: The current internet culture collapses, implodes, inside the subject that is caught in the eternal present. It is a mistake to think that the web is essentially an archive. The present strategy of big tech is to further colonize the present through a real-time regime that rewards us with instant

gratification. So, how can we escape this technological definition of the present? What we need to counter this with a new 21st-century version of the five-year plan. That's the macro level. Why should China be the only country with a Plan? Covid clearly showed that in the current position we're destined to get stuck at the response level. How to get there? Is there any hope that a Green New Deal will be substantially different from the neo-liberal nightmare we're still in? Forget authoritarian right-wing populism. In the short term 'foresight' will have to come from underground efforts to generate collective speculative scenarios in the form of narratives, memes and other visual stories. The think tank and NGO form are in the hands of lawyers and marketeers. What we need are new institutional forms in which speculative thinking can unfold. This is already happening in secret societies and invisible networks, which the platforms to be can no longer grasp.