

Petar Jandrić: In a 2012 interview for Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, you said: “Internet, by and large, has not affected democratic culture, at least not in the West.” You made this statement five years before the election of Donald Trump and the rapid (online) proliferation of post-truth and fake news. Can you please explain your reasoning behind this (for many people counter-intuitive) divorce between democracy and technology? What, if anything, is different in 2021?

Geert Lovink: I honestly do not know where to start. Maybe in the neoliberal early 90s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union... Back then it was decided that the internet was no longer going to become a public infrastructure, resulting in the current monopoly situation called platform capitalism today, which, oddly, goes together very well state censorship and geopolitical divisions of what once promised as a global medium, better known as cyberspace. With politicians of individual nation-states no longer in charge, it is, for instance, unthinkable, that we can safely vote online. ‘Public opinion, steered by social media, is designed to manipulate from the outside, be it Silicon Valley, Moscow or Beijing. In a way, it is absurd that we still do not openly admit this. Already in the 1990s Dutch hacker groups campaigned against online voting machines ‘an sich’ as they could prove, time and again, that their software was fundamentally unsafe and easy to hack. It was such a wake-up call at the time—at least for me. The idea of national sovereignty in the age of the internet is an illusion. We need a new Realpolitik when it comes to cyber-warfare. It seems that the national political/opinion elites still live in the initial phase of denial that the ‘incidents’ like ransomware attacks can be delegated to a hand full of cyber security experts.

We’re now 20-25 years later and the situation has not improved, to say the least. The same can be said of the Habermasian nature of the internet as a public sphere where people can have rational debates and exchange opinions via the internet to come to a consensus. I find it hard to type these words... such a delusion in the age of filter bubbles, algorithms, discriminatory AI and fake news. What the internet does contribute to is obviously on the ‘likes’ and followers level. But we need to acknowledge that this is a polarizing society without necessarily staging open conflict and struggles. However, all of this can change. Nothing I discuss here should be taken as a given. Let’s experiment, write unique, one-off software and design decision making processes for complex hybrid constituencies, both large and small. I am not pessimistic, in this sense. In some ways, internet activism has

yet to start and has been tiny in comparison to the immense and diverse cultures of use—especially during the corona period.

PJ: In the 1990s, you were among the key theorists of the then-emerging concept of tactical media. In a recent interview with Arta Magazine, you said: “Tactical media proposed temporary connections and hybrid forms of uneven streams of information, people, experiences, art forms and content. Tactical means choosing what’s appropriate for the moment: a performance, street art, memes, a song or decentralized networking, any form of expression that says no to power, that occupies space and bring us together and embodies the values that we’re fighting for—and want to share. Needless to say that some things no longer work and do not speak to certain generations.”

How did your understanding of tactical media develop over time? Which things do not speak to today’s generations; what is the way forward?

GL: Let’s first put the term in its historical context. In the 1990s tactical media were so appealing because the media landscape opened up. Exponentially more people gained access to tools due to the drop in prices of electronics and the rise of the personal computer, combined with an opening up of local channels, cheaper design and print facilities, and, last but not least, the democratization of the internet, which, in the 1980s was only used by a limited group of academics. The roll-out of cable television networks occurred hand in hand with the explosion of (often) private satellite television channels. Privatization of the telecom market certainly helped, as did the distribution of zines. In this post-Cold War period, globalization takes command.

In this rapidly changing environments, both activists and artists had a whole array of media at their disposal. This is the tactical moment: chose your weapons, combine them and localize according to specific needs on the ground. At the same time, we see a disappearance of old social movements and the emergence of the NGO as the dominant form of organization. Tactical also meant self-reliance and a strong belief in independent infrastructures. Remember, this is the era of networks before the platforms took over. A decade later the primal creative energy had faded away. Despite promises of resilience, the rhizomatic root systems died.

The other approach to tactical media would be more general and can perfectly operate in today’s political landscape. Several decades later we

should admit that the appeal of the term tactical media is lying in its flexibility, to answer to local needs. Some of us will be active on social media, others maintain a podcast series, do graffiti, street theatre, organize debates and lectures, campaigns, create artworks, build apps or websites or run a hybrid radio station. When we tie these skills, passions and channels together, something starts to happen. This is often the moment when the question of 'strategic media' is raised. I have never avoided this issue but we also have to be aware that we're neither living in the late 1920s nor in the mid-1970s when self-organization of mass movements had crystallized in a solid, interconnected indy infrastructure of movements with their own newspapers, theatres, bars, concert venues, awareness groups, publishing houses, bike repair shops, free radio stations, video groups, film collectives, international solidarity groups, restaurants and bookstores.

As organization remains weak and sporadic, we have to reconcile with the relative, weak state of affairs, ergo the necessary reconciliation with anything tactical. It's direct action at the level of media, taking representation in one's own hand, to stop complaining about others that do not get it right, overcoming the cult of resentment, together. As David Graeber once said: "The principle of direct action is the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free." With tactical media, we have this unique opportunity to liberate ourselves from the Media Question of Representation, even if's only once.

PJ: In your 2018 book with Ned Rossiter, *Organization after Social Media*, you wrote: "If you want to make a lasting contribution that makes a substantial difference you will have to design the standards for communication. It is not enough to unleash a Twitter revolution: you have to develop - and own - the next Twitter platform yourself. This is the politics of the standard: those who can determine the outline of the form determine like no other tomorrow's world."

I completely agree with this argument, and I also sympathize with your sequel which says: "We cannot deal with the unbearable truth that techno-determinism confronts us with. Reducing the world to rules that rule us shuts down the imagination and turns the otherwise docile and routine-minded Western subject into a rebel." How can we balance the politics of standards without falling into the trap of techno-determinism (or any other determinism, for that matter)?

GL: Here I would like to take you all to the Chaos Computer Club and its

diverse hack meetings, camps, congresses, local meetups etc. This is what I see as a possible solution to the dilemma you're pointing at. What's at stake here is the democratization of technology, in which we raise every new generation of engineers, programmers and technicians as a core project to protect democratic culture, value and even constitution to bring together freedom and social responsibility. We cannot simply outsource this task anymore to lawyers, politicians, civil servants and the repressive machinery of police, secret services and the courts. Engineers that design all our systems have a special responsibility, that, I believe, cannot be resolved through top-down regulations.

The idea of the neutral technicians that 'obey' society has been bankrupt for a while. Parliaments do not 'steer' technology, and neither do universities. The current social media impasse shows that mental misery and economic monopolies cannot simply be overruled by legislation. We need to say here that the hacker class wasn't able to prevent 'platform capitalism' from coming into being, and in the end, actively contributed to the current blues. This all ends up in an overall messy situation in which no one is ultimately responsible, or to blame. What we're left with is an active counter-culture that investigates, questions and criticizes, while working alternatives at the same time. What's the techno-intelligentsia today and how do we raise their class awareness, not just an sich, but also für sich?

PJ: In an article published in late 2020 you propose a new form of internet activism: stacktivism. What is stacktivism? How does it link to tactical media of the 1990s? Can stacktivism offer a way out of the dichotomy between the politics of the standard and techno-determinism?

GL: I came up with stacktivism as a next-level of hacktivism that is preoccupied with the production and manipulation of code to a 'Hegelian' meta-level of technology 'governance' that can understand, visualize and communicate the many levels of today's technology stack, from undersea cables, datacentre, fibre optics to the house to the levels of corporate platforms and protocols. Can we see them as one, and then act? Stacktivism is closely related to the growing movement to reclaim parts of the stack as public infrastructure. The idea here is also that everyone can join, on multiple levels. We need a whole set of the campaign as the task is not going to be an easy one. Some would want to push for public open-source software used in education. Otherwise would like to develop alternatives to Airbnb, Uber and Amazon, while the older crowds in this context look at Creative

Commons, Wikipedia, free software and the meaning of public broadcasting in the digital age.

PJ: In a recent interview, Florian Cramer claims that ‘design disciplines often no longer design tangible products, but social processes’. This brings about a reversal of roles between arts and design.

“Most contemporary artists dropped the idea of reinventing society through radical experiments after the 1970s. That idea got taken up by design but in less radical ways. This created the issue of design having become messianic, as it is still based on the idea and work process of designers being confronted with a problem and designing a solution. With the extension of design from objects to social processes, every social problem thus potentially becomes a design challenge.”

Stacktivism seems like a typical case in the point for Cramer’s critique, as it indeed transforms social issues into design challenges. What is lost, and what is gained, in this transformation?

GL: Yes, there was the silent transition from contemporary arts to design, which happened over the past two decades, but more relevant is perhaps the questioning of the ‘what design can do’ agenda, done brilliantly by the other Rotterdam critic, Silvio Lorusso. What happens when designers embrace the ‘design thinking’ method and become social designers and then... managers? A new culture of critical modesty takes centre stage here: we need to admit that we cannot design ourselves out of the current climate crisis. Covid was not a design problem either, and neither is the growing income inequality in the world. This ‘design delusion’ (Lorusso) needs to look right in the face. No more nice stories. Forget all the positive energy and organized optimism as they have become major obstacles themselves while we confront ourselves with the severity of the reality of extinction. Fixing problems only makes the overall situation worse. Design should remove itself out of the scene and start to work elsewhere, in the shadow, and work on parallel structures. This is the same dilemma as we’re currently facing with the ‘broken internet’ metaphor, that needs to ‘fixed’. More and more stand up and argue that the internet is beyond repair. We should forget and ignore ISOC, ICANN, IETF and similar ‘global’ governance bodies. The ‘internet governance’ circles will of course denied all responsibility for the current situation and claim they are innocent (while accepting Big Tech in their midst, aiming to put the blame on ‘Europe’). We’ll have to start from scratch. It’s never too late for that. What’s cybernetics for the 21st-century movement? Here I am inspired

by the work of Bernard Stiegler (who sadly passed away in August 2020).

PJ: Reflecting on the work of Florian Cramer, you mention the concept of the postdigital across several publications. In the interview with Marco Aruga, you wrote:

“Five or six years ago we discovered that, when it comes to art and artistic practice, we were living in the post-digital era, or even post-internet. This has been going on for some time, and — in a way — artists have developed a very rich hybrid language, to show that digital was part of their work, that they were using also physical elements, exhibitions, and so on ... Almost a ‘gesamtkunstwerk’ approach, trying to bring together the immaterial and the material, the real and the virtual, the digital and the post-digital.”

These days, the concept of the postdigital has moved from music and visual arts to science and education. What are the main implications of the postdigital condition for media studies?

GL: Since 2012 I am no longer actively involved in media studies, you will have to ask others how the post-digital impacts this specific academic discipline. I do not work on this concept myself as I find the term confusing. Every time one has to explain that ‘post’ does not refer to something that’s already happened and is behind us. What we’re emphasizing in our work at the Institute of Network Cultures, and, in a way, embodying, is the hybrid approach of convergence. We do not see this happening in a harmonious, holistic way, quite the opposite. There are turbulent dialectic forces at play when we talk about the merger between the real and the virtual. This is what ‘postdigital aesthetics’ points at. There is no peaceful synthesis between the analogue and the digital or between the visible materiality of old powers and new, invisible players. Tesla car is postdigital for me but also Siri and Alexa, in fact, everything that’s evil, that is designed with good intentions, to make our lives more comfortable. We should go for the steampunk approach in this respect: make tech clumsy again. It’s Rushkoff’s law: program or be programmed, beyond the compromised categories of ‘free’ and ‘open’. Big tech is running on open source and we need to face this moral bankruptcy heads on. Also in this case it is time to start from scratch. A first step would be to move away from the legal terrain as the apriori of code production. Licenses didn’t matter. American liberal lawyers like Lessig were wrong. This will be painful to admit but something the next generation will have to sort out. And the Richard Stallman legacy is dead, regardless of whether he was reinstated by his own Free Software Foundation or not.

PJ: Your 2019 book *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism* starts with a poignant introduction: “Welcome to the New Normal. Social media is reformatting our interior lives. As platform and individual become inseparable, social networking becomes identical with the “social” itself.” A postdigital perspective would imply that the social is just a part of the story; these days, technologies have also become intertwined with our ‘natural’ selves. How do you look at these emerging bio digital/postdigital reconfigurations? Who, or what is the postdigital human?

GL: For 20th-century thinkers, artists and activist, the ‘media question’ has been one about representation and enlightenment categories such as a fact or fiction, truth or lies as means to create an identity, a self. We consume media because we want to be entertained and informed. Media have accompanied us in this sense but this has been done in quite a distant way. Media did not just communicate from A to B, they’ve been spheric and ecological yet nowhere near as intimate and personalized as the current social technologies. The aim of today’s tech is to enter everyday life as close as possible, to become a friendly ‘assistant’ in the background. Tomorrow’s news is expected to fulfil a similar role once reporting about the never-ending list of catastrophes reaches the point of entropy. We don’t want to hear any more about the Other as our misery is hard enough to deal with anyway. This is why the design of our system is so important: we need to fight the inherent tendency to close down. The postdigital human is obsessed with self-design (as described by Mieke Gerritzen in her latest book with the same title). I am hesitant to use the word natural and leave that up to Koert Mensvoort and his Next Nature clan.

Rewilding is a good strategy but how can we go beyond the restrictive metaphor of the ‘nature reserve’ and its counterpart of the ‘human park’ as described by Peter Sloterdijk, two decades ago? The global Covid disaster proves that the current way we organize the human-nature divide is no longer work. The virus takes revenge. This is a rat race and more technology will only show that we can no longer keep up and need a fundamental reorganization of resources and the way we deal with animals and the climate at large. What’s sure is that the tech question will, by far, supersede the media question. Social networking is no longer the new kid on the block. This means that we should better sort out quickly how we can communicate, before more urgent matters, will require our full attention.

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