

Email interview with Geert Lovink by business consultant Maik Baumgaertner (late 2021)

Maik Baumgaertner: Thinking specifically about the intersection of the internet and culture, what's on the horizon for 2022? What are you excited or scared about?

Geert Lovink: We've never been scared, otherwise you cannot take up the fight with titans. We need to believe in the exodus of platform capitalism. May see the devastating consequences of the Silicon Valley model of the 'free', the ruthless data extraction and surveillance culture that we all participate in, and start to see there are ways out. For over a decade my small centre has been showing the way that criticism can be paired with working on decentralized alternatives. At the moment I am, again, losing the overview as the list of viable alternatives is growing and growing. Just this morning I stumbled across an alternative for Google Analytics, <https://plausible.io/>. Luckily, Signal and Telegram are becoming mainstream alternatives for WhatsApp—nobody would have predicted this a few years ago. There is TikTok from China... but also think of Discord. In Google's search 'market' there is a growing list as well, from DuckDuckGo to Startpage and Marginalia. However, the elephant in the room here would be Facebook, recently whitewashed as Meta. Unfortunately, the 'correct' alternatives of the Mastodon type of social media have not been able to capture anyone's fascination—including mine.

Maik Baumgaertner: How do you think the conversation surrounding the internet will evolve in society, media and culture in 2022?

Geert Lovink: We will need many more scandals but more important, we need time to build viable alternatives. These two developments go hand in hand. The scandals have been big ever since Snowden came up with his revelations in 2013. Right now, we've got the Haugen whistle blower who worked at Facebook. Yet, no matter how high the waves, there is nothing expected in terms of regulation. Instead, we seeing a kind of parallel internet culture developing for younger generations that are no longer controlled by Silicon Valley but by different dark voices.

I am from the internet generation and still identify with that label and project. However, we can all identify that the internet as such is everything and nothing. This is what we call the infrastructural turn. Internet is not a topic anymore—mostly for bad reasons but alas. If we have to believe the

research agendas no one is using the internet anymore as everyone has moved on. Instead there are 'trending topics' that grow fast, fueled by VC and large research budgets and then disappear into that same black hole called infrastructure. I remain suspicious of them but that not very relevant for you. from big data, AI, robot, internet of things, 3D printing, autonomous vehicles, ER-AR-VR to quantum computing. I am not going to play the role here of futurologist or it's mirror role of the tech critic. We're not doing ideology criticism, and no fashion analysis either. Too much of this is a part of the simulacrum. However, I want to make an exception here for the expanding realm of crypto and monetization.

Maik Baumgaertner: What are the most interesting new subcultures or consumer behaviours you've heard of?

Geert Lovink: Consumerism is really the wrong word in this context. If only we could merely 'consume' internet apps. That would be ideal. Instead, they are consuming us. We are generating data, working hard to be productive for Silicon Valley.

What probably the most interesting subculture of 2021 are the fast growing NFT communities around platforms such as Rarible, OpenSea and Foundation, Nifty Gateway and more. Crypto art is a derivative of the high valuations of Bitcoin, Ethereum and other crypto currencies and comparable 'assets'. I have been into these internet and finance developments since forever (dating back to an internet with bitcoin godfather David Chaum back in 1992) so it is a bit hard for me to say this is 'new' but the mass participation in crypto really is something of the last 3 years. The good thing about crypto is that there always some new platform or service to try out and discuss. More info on MoneyLab network can be found here: www.networkcultures.org/moneylab. Please have a look. While there is a current excitement around art and NFTs, MoneyLab stresses the importance to discuss the wider context around the invention of digital money services and revenue models for the arts.

Maik Baumgaertner: How do you see these behaviours playing out in 2022?

Geert Lovink: The uncertain factor here is the direction of the global economy in the post-Covid period, sudden regulations such as the ones from China and a possible crypto crash (which is, as you know, not going to be first). Then there is the overall geopolitical situation. I am using the image or metaphor here of the 'stack of crises', perverting Benjamin Bratton's 2015

book *The Stack*. Some believe that the crises will ultimately converge. This is what we call synthesis, not to be confused with Singularity □ Negative interest rates meets real estate boom meets flooding, bush fires and drought. This may or may not already become a reality in 2022, but that's not relevant here. I am talking here about Covid, climate change, growing inequality, pollution at unknown levels but also brexit, unpredictable moves from Russia and other expressions of disintegration in the age geopolitics and nationalisms, leading to a war between US and China.

Maik Baumgaertner: Are there any other types of organizations doing interesting work in this space?

Geert Lovink: For sure, the relevant networks that are no longer visible for Google and Facebook. Some of these will be offline, under the radar. Others are on Discord or Twitter, Telegram or Signal.

Maik Baumgaertner: What new cultural concepts are you becoming aware of?

Geert Lovink: Regionalism is one. Grace combined with radical care would be another. These ones are at the level of alternatives. I am hesitant to mention decentralization here as this positive value is also clearly showing its dark sides lately. We want to scale up alternatives, yet scale itself is the problem. If we want to do good, we need to implement degrowth and start with our own activities, which is clearly a paradox as this strategy clearly gives way to nihilist libertarian right-wing forces that team up with nationalists and other xenophobic, sexist and racist forces. In terms of post-Covid internet culture there will certainly be new forms of hybrid events and deeper integration of real and virtual events, not just only Zoom (as in the Covid lockdown periods) or old school offline events but more interesting mixes. Topics here are participation of the online others and dissident resistance inside online mass events.

Maik Baumgaertner: What are the areas of innovation that you think might shape the internet 2022?

Geert Lovink: Everything in the realm of social media exodus, radical tech alternatives and payments/revenue models. As I said, the 'free' internet model based on secretive data extraction is morally bankrupt, and has been for quite some time. We need to address the growing economic inequality that is paired with climate changes, leading to migration, and tons of other

issues. We urgently need to move away from the organized optimism of the global managerial class towards a leadership that is problem focused, embraces negativity and understands the real concerns that people have. Innovation today means engagement, not looking away, stopping the extraction logic and illicit money laundering. Automate the redistribution of wealth and resources. That's innovation for the 21st century.

Maik Baumgaertner: What new businesses in the tech space do you think are going to become a bigger deal next year?

Geert Lovink: No doubt, the alt.fin/defi/web3 space, in all its forms. To me AI is boring, not creative, just repressive, administrative in nature. Forget self-driving cars. Automation is a lie, we know there are always humans behind the screen. We are fond of the idea that we could fall in love with machines and bots but in the end fool ourselves thinking that we deal with the artificial beauty of a pure machine.