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I am proud to announce the Spanish translation of *Stuck on the Platform*, translated by Matheus Calderón Torres and published by Bellaterra Edicions in Barcelona. I will present the book on June 8, 2023, at CCCB, in dialogue with Joana Moll. More details on this and other related events soon.



The Spanish edition has a preface written by theorist César Rendueles, which I am offering here in an English translation:

Foreword -Internet and the Palaces of the People by César Rendueles

I met Geert Lovink at a meeting on free culture at the *Círculo de Bellas Artes* in Madrid, just a few months before the financial crash of 2008. I had read his first book translated into Spanish, *Fibra oscura* (Dark Fiber), a collection of essays that defended the critical potential of free culture on the Internet from an anti-utopian perspective—an unusual position in those days. I remember very well something he said in his conference and which, since then, I have often quoted and paraphrased: “Not everyone experiences the possibility of modifying the drivers of their printer as an emancipatory conquest.” Free culture, Lovink explained to us, should be something more ambitious, exciting and politically complex than free software and open access in their blunter, more technocratic versions.

It is hard to get a sense today of the discursive centrality of technology debates among the political left at the time. The antagonistic social movements wanted to see in free culture an innovative and communicatively sexier way of non-commercial collaboration than traditional cooperativism. Looking back, it feels a bit embarrassing, but it was not uncommon to idealise the figure of the hacker as an ‘aggiornamento’, an updated version of the professional Leninist revolutionary. The techno-utopian left also had its conciliatory and social democratic version. At an election rally in 2009, with the Great Recession already raging, then-president José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero claimed that what Spain needed was “fewer bricks and more computers.” From the perspective of the second decade of our century—with millions of people trapped in the pyramid scam of the crypto-bubble—it is hard to understand that this is such an obviously advantageous replacement for the real estate dictatorship that Spain has suffered for decades.

It would be unfair to blame progressive forces for some sort of technological naivety endemic to that ideological environment. Techno-utopianism was part of the *Zeitgeist* inherited from the savage era of neoliberal globalisation. And the alternative was not very palatable either: a bunch of melancholic European intellectuals if you pardon the pleonasm, who believed that the fate of civilisation was inextricably linked to their dusty Olivetti typewriters.

The reality is that post-Keynesian deregulated capitalism established from day one a deep affinity with the hegemonic model of digital communication. The neoliberal counter-revolution and the project of a de-institutionalised, private and commoditised digital communications system fed off each other. Emerging technologies helped justify the dismantling of post-war systems of

financial control, and neoliberals generally saw the construction of a global communication network as an important material basis for their political project. But they also understood that digital technology provided something that capitalism had hitherto lacked: a model of society and a culture of its own, a cordial, non-monetarized projection of global markets onto everyday social bonds.

Since then and for at least four decades, the vertigo of vital precariousness associated with financialisation and labour flexibility was contained by the promises of economic growth, post-materialist expectations of the expansion of expressive subjectivity, and, increasingly, by the advancing of digital technologies. It was a new world full of dangers, yes, but also of exciting opportunities for individual expression and the reinvention and global connectivity. When the neoliberal project began to implode it dragged with it, first and foremost, the fantasy of a precarity with a human face: the false promises of a positive break from Fordist chains that would exponentially increase the possibilities of personal self-realisation through the creative pursuit of exciting lifestyles went to hell. For a few years, digital technologies turned out to be the last lifeboat of a decaying social regime, accumulating sky-high expectations for protection and reconciliation. Digital technologies were imagined as the solution to the Great Recession, labour problems, the ecological crisis, educational dilemmas, cultural challenges, intolerance, authoritarianism and all the rest. It is literally hard to think of a single area of collective or personal life in which someone did not believe that a few futuristic-looking gadgets and a broadband connection were going to drive a positive qualitative leap.

Since then, the bet on technological solutionism has first frayed and then reversed, giving rise to an increasingly funereal and even dystopian collective mood. No one doubts the centrality of technology companies in global capitalism, but this privileged position does not seem to be softening the neoliberal project or offering an alternative to its degradation. On the contrary, it tends to exacerbate the practices of labour precarisation, monopoly concentration and financialisation. The “network society”, the great hope for democratisation and equality over the past decades, has finally revealed itself as the ideal environment for some of the largest oligopolies in history to flourish, digital mega-corporations that no government is in a position to control. Similarly, the image of social media, not as a promising terrain of increased intelligence and participation, but as a jungle of aggression, neo-Nazi extremism, panoptic surveillance and fake

news is becoming increasingly widespread.

In our parliaments and media, strong, neo-conservative political figures are legitimised as an alternative to the failure of cosmopolitan sociability, in a world perceived as conflictual and threatening. Renouncement in terms of freedom or tolerance is the price to be paid in exchange for the promise of protection from an indeterminate but terrifying array of global dangers. Post-utopian technologies - mainstream social media, corporate AI and Big Data - are the digital version of this post-neoliberal authoritarianism. The platform demands, like the radical right, that we give up our civil and labour rights, control of our privacy or democratic sovereignty. It offers us, in return, a promise of calculability and order in a world of terrifying uncertainties. A promise, to be sure, as false as that of far-right politicians appealing to the wounded narcissism of their voters, but purged of neo-fascist atavisms and adherences through the language of cyber-fetishism.

The Covid-19 crisis accelerated this relationship of resigned subordination to post-utopian digital communication systems. Within a few weeks, public administrations and all kinds of companies were required to carry out a large part of their activities online. Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp (all owned by the same company) replaced many of the traditional spaces for socialising. Netflix and Spotify replaced our cinema and concert halls. Offices and meetings were spread across hundreds of thousands of homes connected by a dense network of private apps. It was a dark and ambiguous social experiment that, in a sense, showed the limitations of the project of widespread digitisation. It takes something as brutal and violent as a pandemic to fulfil internet-centric fantasies and bring about a profound technological colonisation of our everyday lives. Often, digital versions of education or various artistic expressions—not to mention family relationships—proved to be poor simulacra, light years away from the promises of augmented reality. The pandemic showed us with a magnifying lens that, in order to continue with our social life and our professional activity, to access leisure, culture or education, it was essential to accept the conditions imposed by large technological corporations. The core of the existing digital society was revealed to us in plain sight: a monopolistic network that allows huge private companies to control fundamental infrastructures of both productive activity and our common life, offering us in exchange an endless succession of tenebrous videoconferences and toxic relationships on social networks.

What's perhaps most striking is how unsurprising it all was, how familiar and coherent this situation of collective helplessness and extreme digital dependence seemed to us. The reason, at least in part, is the almost complete disappearance of the free culture movement, which has naturalised our perception of technology as an economic and political black box. The pendulum swing from euphoric techno-utopianism to Hobbesian digital catastrophism swept away copyleft, digital collaboration, media antagonism, guerrilla communication... Of course, there are still many, many people all over the world who collaborate on networks, who free their work, organise hacker labs and fight against digital enclosures, but unfortunately, their programmatic presence in the public space is practically anecdotal. This is not exactly a victory for the forces that sought the privatisation of the digital commons but something worse. A defeat, at least, is understandable, it may be painful, but it makes sense. Rather, it is as if we had accepted the need for centralised planning as an alternative to market failures, and then given BlackRock the task.

This book confronts us lucidly and sometimes ruthlessly with the impasse in which we are trapped. Digital media theory is a reflexive environment dominated by hype culture: like children with ADD, we pounce on the latest technological toy without looking back until, a few months (sometimes weeks) later, a new spotlight appears. In contrast, Geert Lovink has managed over many years to develop something extremely valuable and improbable: a critical (and, even more difficult, self-critical), continuous and long-standing memory of the Internet and social media. This is the intellectual energy that turns *Stuck on the Platform* into a profound diagnosis of the sense of impasse we have not with this or that technology - Second Life or MySpace- but with the very project of a networked space of socialisation.

Something has broken down in the digital environment, something that has to do with the relationship between our expectations - what we expect to get from networks - and what we feel we are being asked for in return. The price has become too high for many people. We continue to participate in social media because, as we learned during the pandemic, we perceive that there is no outside to escape to. The alternative seems to be paralysis, another form of gridlock. This book gives us clues to understand what is happening to us and thus has the opportunity to rebuild an improved critical culture that avoids some of the blinded paths we have travelled in the past.

Historical transitions are complex phenomena, arising from the confluence - mediated by a mixture of virtue and fortune - of independent and heterogeneous factors. Stuck on the Platform, as well as a very subtle diagnosis of the contemporary technopolitical crisis, offers an imaginative and exciting approach to some of the threads with which we will have to weave a digital world worth living: from the physical infrastructure of the Internet to the institutionalisation of networks, via public control, citizen participation, user desire and collective mobilisation. These are clues for turning the Internet and social networks, to borrow Eric Klinenberg's expression, into social infrastructures, into people's palaces.