By Max Moorhead

Geert Lovink is a media theorist, net critic, and activist, who has been writing about, and experimenting with, decentralized online communal life since the 1980s. His latest books, *Stuck on the Platform: Reclaiming the Internet* (2022) and S*ad by Design: On Platform Nihilism* (2019), diagnose the melancholy of online life today and look for alternatives to the corporate platforms that dominate much of the internet's landscape. I spoke with Geert about experimentation during the age of decentralized networks, and how to make sense of our desire for experiments with communal life when many of us spend a large part of our waking life online.

TR: How do you see the commons as a political strategy connected to questions of technological infrastructure?

GL: There are multiple commons — and even more strategies. The term commons is inherently vague, up to the point of being an empty common denominator that brings people and processes together, or the opposite, leading to identitarian enclosures. Commons is also a deeply liberal term that, ultimately, can get monopolized by expensive, legal professionals. There is common as in communism and common in communal. Do you prefer commonality or rather talk about the religious undertones of 'community' that Mark Zuckerberg can't stop talking about? Pick and choose. I prefer neighbouring terms such as 'free cooperation', which I developed together with Trebor Scholz, now two decades ago, which led him to found this inspiring global movement of 'platform cooperatives'. Instead of focusing on what's in common, I come from the 1970s/80s social movement context that once opposed the empty trick of unreconstructed late-Stalinist 'Euro-communists'. I only deal with temporary autonomous commons, real existing lived ones. Instead of the common, the movements I come from stressed 'unity in difference', and 'beyond the fragments', a rhizomatic strategy of smaller units that come together and create Events. The communists, luckily, vanished — for good historical reasons — and, ultimately, so did many autonomous infrastructures. So here we are, back again, in 1872, 1905, 1919, 1968, 1977, 1989, 1999 and 2011 (choose or add more). What's to be done once there is something 'in common'?

TR: In *Sad By Design* you say you're more attracted to networks and smaller

groups as compared to Hardt and Negri's idea of the "commonwealth of the commons." How do you see this distinction, and how do we form these autonomous networks that don't just become bureaucratic in nature, and are still communal without replicating past models of communes?

GL: How to scale up to the higher level of common infrastructures, public stacks, socialized logistics, open source software and protocols? That should be our concern. However, the strategic debates are not taking place — yet. There is a non-existing intellectual climate where the Hegelian accelerationist techno-totality faction and their anarchist grassroots counterparts do not meet. It is macro against micro. There's a culture of mutual suspicion that we ought to get rid

of. I bet we'll get there soon. The climate crisis will force us to come together and sort this out. I want to go into this with an open mind as the 'stack of crises' is only growing. Urgency will force movements to work on all levels. Take the German Bits & Trees network, this is a collective effort to deal with the 'IT causing pollution, energy waste and mineral disasters' to see what can actually be done beyond accusations and the neo-liberal 'woke' spread of personal guilt that lacks any strategy apart from creating resignation and the policing of others. IT is now a serious environmental issue.

TR: The Woodbine network & collective formed after Occupy Wall Street and Hurricane Sandy, and sees these crises of financial capitalism and this new era of climate disaster as connected. How do you see autonomy and the horizon of the commons in relation to the internet, ecology, and climate change?

GL: In my lecture Extinction Internet I have made my own probes into this field. I have a history in the environmental/anti-nuclear movements, before moving into the indy media/computer/internet arena. At the time, IT and computing were in the hands of corporations, telecoms and universities and did not have a priority to serve ordinary citizens, let alone social movements. The NGO sector had its own computer networks, focused on internal communication, ignoring the public at large. In that period email was a cheap way to replace international phone calls, fax and paper/postal services. The emphasis was on coordination and databases that stored evidence and reports. Fast forward thirty years and every protest campaign has to act like an e-commerce start-up: create a logo and brand to develop

an aggressive social media strategy on Insta, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube. While on the levels of food, energy, gender and transportation there are emerging codes of 'correct' behaviour (not harming others, the planet, increasing post-colonial awareness) this is not at all extended into the sphere of smartphone use and apps. There is not even a basic awareness, a fact that was only recently addressed publicly regarding BLM and Extinction Rebellion. Why do such movements have so little privacy and security awareness, and use the major platforms for all their internal communication? In this sense, it's all very early days. Even for security reasons, activists would be the first to only use Signal, Mastodon, Matrix and mundane alternatives like DuckDuckGo, DeepL, Cryptpad and OpenMaps. There are dozens more. Even after 10-15 years of systematic criticism of Google, Apple, Meta and Amazon by fellow activists and researchers, the collective dependency of current social movements on platform capitalism (and their data centres) remains uncontested. Where to start?

TR: You've talked about how NFTs, Blockchain, and Crypto are all part of a right-wing libertarian culture dating back to the 90s, and yet many young people who become interested in these technologies speak of decentralized networks, government accountability, and taking back control of intellectual property from corporations. Do you see potential in this interest, even if it's misguided? Or are all of these threads only leading us further into an anarcho-capitalist web?

GL: The young generation, born into the digital, understands that money is programmable, without perhaps realizing the paradigmatic shifts that have happened. Value underlies the laws of the digital and the networks. For them, digital money is the oil of the platforms. I do not blame them for experimenting — and gambling. Never blame the consumers. However, they also need to become literate in terms of political economy and global finance. Young people also can't lose so much, there is not a lot at stake, and, potentially, a lot to gain. But then again, they also need to understand that there is no decentralization in a system of data centres and platforms. States and corporations are not going to redistribute wealth, young working people have to get an income for a wide range of sources, not just from one fixed wage that in the past used to feed a family. There already is a multitude of income sources, currencies and revenue models. Crypto is one of them.

TR: In Stuck on the Platform you say that the Platform has reached the point

of being a disciplinary machine — like the clinic, school, factory, and jail — and that we must view its power as a repressive one. When thinking about historic examples of experimental clinics or schools, both Deleuze and Guattari took part in experimental clinics and academies (Le Borde and Paris 8 University). Do you think there is a way of subverting the repressive power of the platform by creating similar experiments?

GL: Deleuze and Guattari (and other proponents of French Theory) are products of the Les Trente Glorieuses, the three prosperous decades in France. They did the experiments you mentioned as part of the Long March through the Institutions that defined the 68-generation during the 1970s. Unfortunately, my punk/post-1977 generation was confronted with a much more sober reality. After the 70s, economic prosperity was over. Instead, we faced high unemployment, the closing and move of industries to cheaper places, and a never-ending austerity, accompanied by the neo-liberalism policies a la Thatcher and Reagan. This coincided with the demise of the Eastern Block and related communist parties and Marxist sects in the West, that D&G are often indirectly in dialogue with, up to the point of the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union.

There was zero room for experimentation inside institutions for us. In part, this is also why my generation embraced the digital and new media: the 1968 D&G generation remained techno-ignorant as they didn't need more media, more connections or more networks. They already had access to newspapers, publishers, film, television, radio, theatre, you name it. They were fighting inside clinics, not outside its walls. We were indirectly told to piss off: enjoy your bloody autonomy and sort it out yourself (it almost sounds neo-liberal, right?). So busy with themselves they were also not very good teachers (but that's another issue). We did not see any possibility to fire or push aside the 1968 generation. Even the suggestion of 'competing' with them seemed ludicrous. Fazit: let the 68 generation have fun inside their bureaucracies. This is why our generation almost naturally switched (or retreated?) to DIY self-organization, from free radios, zines and squats to free theatre spaces, feminist collectives, vegan restaurants, music labels, cafes, concert halls up to print shops, publishing houses and alternative distribution channels to cater to leftist, feminist and anarchist bookstores, culminating in the 1990s notion of tactical media, when this infrastructure was combined with the possibilities of 'new media'.

The 'indy' infrastructure declined in the late 90s. Because of the demise, no

one was able to create working alternatives for the internet giants. We celebrated the 'short summer of the internet' in full awareness that it was going to be over soon. I must say that it is too easy to blame free software programmers, artists and activists for the rise of platform capitalism. Such a judgement is grotesque and part of a problematic culture that blames global issues of power on 'failing' fellow activists.

TR: In *Sad By Design* you write about the shift from traditional media and media studies to internet studies. I'm curious if you see potential in reclaiming any older forms of media such as radio. Radio in America has become largely a tool of the right-wing due to the deregulation of (talk) radio in the 80s, but I'm interested since it's a (largely) free resource that anyone can tune into, and many older people still use.

GL: To me, radio today is podcasting plus streaming, combined with audio and music cultures on Bandcamp, Spotify, Soundcloud, YouTube and hopefully through other, more irregular channels. It's unclear where analogue terrestrial radio fits into this and if we can hope for its renaissance. As you indicate, it still exists and is firmly in commercial hands (although not in all countries). The problem today is not licenses but the lack of audience. People simply no longer carry transistor radios with them, they have smartphones — in unprecedented numbers, 3-4 billion. However, the car radio is refusing to die, an interesting case of device resistance. I agree with you that we need to regain lost territory when it comes to radio. I produced radio programs myself for 12 years and still contribute to Patapoe Serieus. Where are the cracks in the media delivery systems? Where is the forgotten spectrum? But let's also look at the smartphone side and see if we can introduce new or existing apps to establish correspondent networks. People are already massively using voice messages but are 'we', on the radio, using this? Not enough. Here it's about moderation and filtering of others, not about diversity and weirdness. Talk radio is a highly edited, centralized affair. In my perspective, it is a genre that should be blown to pieces by unexpected pop-up channels with a multiplicity of voices.

I am not interested in nostalgic moves (such as climbing on roofs to install FM antennas), yet we can learn a thing or two from the return of vinyl. Book culture and paper newspapers can also make a similar comeback. Radio is super cheap but what are transmitters without receivers? It's all about squatting the extremely precious and intimate app space on the phone. Brecht's radio theory is a reality today, but we haven't even noticed. Should

we occupy shortwave? To what cause? Just because we can? I think we also could crack open the cinema space, in short, bring our own media vibes into public space, dancing in the streets and parking lots, as clubs are either closed or too expensive.

I also believe we can kick off unsupervised planetary exchanges. How often have you had debates or jam sessions with comrades, artists and other irregulars in Chongqing, Karachi and Kinshasa? Mexico City, Jakarta and Mumbai start your stream. Or Kyiv, for that matter, we attempt right now as part of the UkrainaTV network. We do not need anything for this and can be done at no cost. However, the geopolitical turn lately has made all this almost unthinkable. Planetary subversion? Let's go for it, sabotage the cultural and political borders and boundaries. We need to start from scratch here, which is weird from a cosmo-technics perspective, but also something that offers unheard possibilities for untimely tactical media.

TR: How do you personally relate to online platforms? Is there a way to re-enchant embodied experiences without falling into digital dualism?

GL: Back in 2017 I realized that I was working on the historical sequence and structural relationship between three key concepts that shaped me: **media** (alternative, sovereign, tactical), back in the long 1980s; **networks**, which shaped the 1990s and beyond; and **platforms**. Needless to say, I have a distant and cold relationship with platforms. After all, they defeated 'our' networks and 'our' media, and subsumed aka destroyed them. For economics, platforms can be useful, but in the cultural, artistic, political and knowledge contexts their architectures are disastrous. I do not subscribe to scale as a goal in itself. If you want to do that, there are many indirect ways to reach the 8 billion inhabitants of this planet, for instance through protocols and other cosmo-technical forms of agreements and decision-making. I can deal with the politics of processual knowledge.

Platforms, on the other hand, create false forms of totality in which power is made invisible. The first transparent, fully customizable platform has yet to be built. Platforms are made for invisible data extraction. If we want to implement 'data prevention', and not just the liberal idea of 'data protection', we need smaller, not bigger systems. The abuse of power by platforms comes as no surprise. Why be on the same website with 1-2 billion people? That's not exceptional anymore these days. To answer your second question, the answer to centralized monopolies is not to switch off. I never

bought into European offline romanticism. The alternative is to realize organized networks and tools to get work done, together. We need to learn how to elegantly ignore baroque sprawls of additional functionalities, recommendations, likes and so on. And then there is an element that Silicon Valley consciously ignored over the past three decades: online deliberation and decision-making. How do we come together, organize ourselves, fight (yes) and come to agreements? All the rhetoric around 'trust' is bankrupt and urgently needs to be reinvented. The crypto scene made a start with this but, ultimately, submitted all procedures to the speculative 'growth' logic.

TR: You've discussed how the historic Avant-garde ended with the end of Modernism. How was the development of the internet related to this moment, and do you see any new hope for an "avant-garde of the commons" as you describe it?

GL: This is a dark and dull, regressive era, dominated by stagnation and inward tendencies, despite rising tensions in society and inspiring uprisings. If you look around carefully, you will find countless seeds, kernels and micro-utopian prototypes of another world. This is almost not the issue anymore. We perhaps even have too many alternatives on offer, at least when we're looking at fields such as agriculture and software. There is recycling, degrowth and repair happening at all levels but its scale is minuscule and there is no time left anymore as structures are collapsing around us. We're facing a retreating elite that refuses even basic management of crises. With neo-liberal market thinking failing at all levels, the political alternative is resentment-driven right-wing populism — not 'our' catalogue of do-good alternatives. In the end, we'll have to face the question of power. The bottom-up belief that the citizen-as-consumer is going to make a difference is a naïve one. However, if we want to scale up, we first need working prototypes so the phase of experimentation was never in vain — taking into account that we properly documented these experiences, including its flaws and failures.

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