

(This email interview was conducted in July 2023 by Carlos Scolari for the Spanish edition of the *Extinction Internet* essay and primarily deals with my 2022 book *Stuck on the Platform*)

Carlos Scolari: At the beginning, US cyberculture was strongly connected to Californian alternative movements. A few days ago, while walking through Amsterdam together, you talked about your activism in the squatter movement in the late 1970s. How was in your case the transition from street activism to digital cultures? How did this background influence the creation of the Institute of Network Cultures?

Geert Lovink: From day one my involvement in social movements such as anti-nuclear struggles and squatting have been closely tied to my involvement in alternative media. Together with my comrade-activist Eveline Lubbers, I wrote my MA thesis in social and political science in 1983 about the squatters 'bluf!' weekly we founded, placing them in the wider context of alternative revenue models. During my following year, living in a West-Berlin squat, I changed my focus and became more interested in theory and the humanities, culminating in my 1987 'crisis year' decision to become an independent media theorist. Yet, I had no clue how to turn this into a profession. Needless to say, the 1968 generation was focusing on their own careers. My in-between generation was literary 'autonomous': sort it out yourself. So, for twenty years I had no contacts at all in academia (there were no 'digital culture' or 'new media' programs yet) and somehow worked as a freelancer in arts and culture, being unemployed for nine years, building up a corpus of critical work and indy infrastructures such as free radio stations like Radio 100 and Patapoe, our theory collective [Bilwet/Agentur Bilwet/Adilkno](#), printing presses like De Raddraaier from where we produced bluf! and the Stencilzolder above the Nieuwmarkt Roodmerk café (where we produced the bi-weekly internal innercity squatters zine De Grachtenkrant, which I co-founded early 1979 and ran till late 1981) and publishing houses like Raket & Lont, SUA and a new one we founded in 1988 called Ravijn in which I remained involved till the mid-late 90s.

Essentially from 1987 onwards all this work was already digital and the step to join the internet was gradual and small. But what really changed around 1993-94 was the fact that so many more people became involved in computer networks. At the time we already discussed the question of whether the internet had become a sublimation for autonomous struggles.

We need to take into account here that the entire 1980s up to the mid-90s were dominated by waves of economic crises, austerity, and the disappearance of entire industries amidst a dominant neo-liberal climate. Add to that the fall of the Berlin Wall (which we celebrated) and get an idea of how in Europe we entered the internet age.

I have to say that Amsterdam is a special case, perhaps somewhat similar to Berlin. In the mid-1990s in numerous European cities free and public internet cultures grew up inside alternative media infrastructures of squats, free radio and wild cable TV programs, but also debating centres such as De Balie and the pop temple Paradiso, as in the case of Amsterdam. Next projects like Adilkno and Patapoe, there was the festival Next Five Minutes, the hacker provider xs4all and the local The Digital City, The internet workshop and content provider desk.nl, also the ex-Yugo support campaign for independent media called Press Now and not to forget the nettime mailing list communities that started in 94/95. I am working on history that will bring together all these stories, which will be ready one day, I promise).

After dotcom mania and the following dotcom crash, I moved to Australia, Linda and I got married, our son Kazimir was born there—and I got a PhD certificate—a necessary piece of paper to kick off the Institute of Network Cultures, which I started one I returned to Amsterdam, early 2004. We indeed built up this centre for independent research network as an indy media (research) centre inside a higher education institution. The idea was not to beg for academic credibility. This strategy, of course, came with a price, one that I was fully aware of: no academic research grants, no PhD students etc. We're still the same size as 10-15 years ago. But look at our INC, 20 years young, we're still alive—thanks to the vocational, applied science nature of our polytech HvA that supported us over the years. We're small, like an Asterix and Obelix village, and are proud of what we've achieved so far and do not complain (... instead we criticize ;).

CS: In the 1990s you introduced the concept of “tactical media” understood as a mix between art and activism oriented to temporary interventions in the media sphere. Do you think this kind of action is still useful in the contemporary platform ecosystem? Do the hyper-accelerated and ephemeral dynamics of textual production, circulation and consumption reduce the impact of these interventions?

GL: This is really not up to the older generation of activists and artists to decide. What might be attractive to the ‘tactical’ gesture of mixing real and

virtual, digital and analogue, old and new, dominant and marginal, street art and VR chat, is the freedom it provides. Hybrid actions overcome the heaviness of being 'stuck on the platform' and point at non-puritan ways out of the dead street called social media. This is very much the current practice at UkrainaTV in Krakow, a wild streaming video network in which we at INC are involved as a supporting node. The idea of tactical is to create one-off connections between performance, DJ/club culture, meme production, street art and political interventions, including collective forms of reflections and debate about what does and doesn't work in certain situations.

We know certain things will, and others won't get 'viral'. There is a serious political limitation to working with mainstream platforms. Make no mistake: the algorithm will not be on our side. And with AI as a serious distraction, we need to focus on what forms of organization will work. Many feel we're running out of time so why waste our time on the 'AI question'? Hanging in the margins is a form of luxury politics few can afford. This makes it all the more urgent to find out, together, how to be inclusive, and oppose schisms and divisive moralism to create temporary coalitions for issues such as climate, housing, health, social inequality and yes, independent media infrastructures outside of Silicon Valley and the state. This starts with inspiring nodes and networks that can easily be replicated and scaled because otherwise resistance and social change will not happen.

CS: Platform seems to be the new buzzword in conversations about digital culture. Did the platform kill the original 'spirit' of the digital networks? What has survived of that democratic, participative, and almost anarchic element that was present in the early years of the Internet and the World Wide Web? Or it has completely disappeared?

GL: There is no doubt that the platform has incorporated and then killed the network logic and made it next to impossible to operate outside of their 'walled gardens'. Good luck running an email list today that contains Gmail addresses: Google simply treats you as a spam provider and de facto closes down. There are fewer and fewer possibilities to run independent servers. This has turned talk of 'decentralized' services into a farce. Yes, decentralized inside AWS, Google and Microsoft. What's left of the outside has to be found in China, Russia and Iran. This infrastructural blues is even worse than the mental side of 'platform dependency' that I have described over the past five years. Recently I came to the conclusion that all my writings were too soft. It is no longer enough to analyze the haunted phone

as the place of Being. The reality is much harsher. Centralized platforms seem to be the easy solution but they are obviously not very resilient. In contrast, the metaphor of the 'dark forest' came up, which is not quite as clandestine as the 'dark web' but comparable as it is outside of the data-hungry extractivist forces. Let's not be too mysterious about its technical dimension: it can be a Discord server, Telegram channel, closed Signal group, a temporary autonomous zone inside VR-Chat and maybe even an email list for the occasional boomer or geek.

Apart from semi-hidden online spaces that can be utilized for self-organization, there is a parallel need for larger and open public arenas. We can easily state that online agora is dead and a naïve idea. Everything can and will be deconstructed but do not be surprised that after such cynical recollections, you will find yourself in a lonely digital desert. All forms of the social are these days vulnerable to relentless nihilist attacks. Draw the woke card and it's over. Against this, we need to insist that we need public forums that will explicitly not be 'safe spaces'. This doesn't mean that we tolerate sexism, racism or other forms of discrimination, but we need debating spaces where differences and disagreements can be expressed to bring forward collective forms of discourse. We need these places also to showcase best practices as many are lost and tap into the dark when it comes to alternative visual languages and rules of behaviour.

Your question of what's left is a legitimate one, and here I am less pessimistic. What's left are the people, social movements like housing protests, Black Lives Matter, solidarity with migrants and Extinction Rebellion. But also the uprisings in Hong Kong and Minsk, protests in France, you name it. We can observe that all these movements arose despite the platforms. Imagine if there would be an independent internet culture, aimed at facilitating self-organization, without censorship and other forms of algorithmic interference... There is a multitude of urgencies these days but ordinary people can only voice them, and channel them, through profile-centric platforms, exclusively designed for self-promotion, controlled by the state and other authorities.

CS: Your translation *Atascados en la Plataforma*, published by Bellaterra in 2023, is a highly critical work that goes countercurrent of the digital apocalypticism present in Orwellian authors like Byung-Chul Han or Shoshana Zuboff. How do you see this advance of apocalyptic discourses after almost two decades (1990-2010) of Californian discourses where the

digital utopia predominated?

GL: There has always been an apocalyptic undercurrent in Silicon Valley culture, which was already present in the late 1980s. Many associate this with the Unabomber, cyberpunk and the work of sci-fi writers such as Gibson, Sterling and Stephenson and the early edition of Burning Man and its post-industrial culture. The digital era arose in an age of the decline of the American Empire and the wading of the West as a dominating global force. At first glance, this is hard to reconcile with the cold optimism of new-age preachers who have been selling individual salvation through the use of apps. The Big Tech marketing machine continues to function but has in fact been hampering over the past five years when it comes to the launch of new products. The new kid on the block is in fact a Chinese app, TikTok. Both Libre and the Metaverse flopped. While internet dependency rose to an all-time high during Covid it was e-commerce and streaming services that thrived. All the rest has been focused on the consolidation of markets, which in any respect has grown to a dazzling number of over five billion users worldwide.

It is true what you're saying: the turning point was in 2010 when the impact of the global financial crisis started to unfold. This is not just the period when the smartphone took over as the dominant internet access device but also the moment of the launch of bitcoin and the start of the blockchain/crypto hype cycles (in which Silicon Valley has had no involvement it formed a threat to its revenue models). Then we had Snowden, Brexit, Trump and authoritarian rulers such as Putin, Xi Jinping, Orbán, Modi and Bolsonaro. All this meant that high-tech solutionism had to enforce its globalist positivism in an age that was anything but progressive, dominated by a 'stack of crises,' from climate to Covid. The Zeitgeist of the past decade has been one of the geo-political tensions, right-wing populism and a growing disbelief in any belief system, including techno-fixes. The ideology that appeals to young people is no longer the facilitating neo-liberal globalist one but the regressive techno-libertarianism, fueled by a remarkable criminal energy. Law and order consensus has broken down. Politicians can no longer deliver—but neither can digital technology, a force that is increasingly becoming part of the problem. We can see this in the failed marketing of AI. From early on, the computer engineering class was divided over its dark side, not just the fact that it eliminates jobs but is supposedly also going to be an existential threat.

In recent times, the role of internet critics like myself has become even more useless as journalists and other mediators immediately started to feature the internal critical debates and manifestos that called for a moratorium on the further development of AI. Remarkably different in comparison to our attempts to address the platform monopoly status, labour conditions in the industry such as delivery workers and moderators, the use of electricity in the case of crypto and data centres, the disaster in Congo and elsewhere around rare metals, the e-waste disaster, not to mention the mental damage inflicted upon young generations—my topic.

CS: In your book, you write: “Critical scholarship seems to be unable to produce anything other than belated revelations without consequences”. How can artistic interventions open new conversations and horizons?

GL: We need to make a difference between the experimental, and laboratory status of developing alternative concepts and a more urgent question of how all these prototypes, software and related social practices can scale up. What fails across the board is ‘middleware’, small and medium-sized cultural institutions that can scale up public, commons-driven alternatives. The problem is the financial but also cultural hegemony of the venture capital model that is solely focused on the establishment of monopolies with the outspoken aim to eliminate all existing and potential ‘competition’. There are no ‘ecosystems’ anymore. No matter where you look change is undermined by this logic. It is also related to the victory of large-scale infrastructures, from Google to Amazon but also container shipping. Artists cannot do much, in this respect, other than attack the neo-liberal capitalist logic and go to the core. Perhaps it is time we admit that we’ve got enough utopias.

We need to gather, in large numbers, to discuss the next stage: what’s to be done after the next breakdown? Did we learn anything from the last pandemic? Scaling up does not mean centralizing control and command. Neither do we to fall back into federated or decentralized solutions and their deconstruction. What can we learn from the moral bankruptcy of open-source and free software? That debate is still ahead of us and avoided by most cultural and political players. My proposal would be a modular approach of tools and models that can easily be used and adapted to different local and cultural circumstances. This can be accompanied by scaling up new institutional forms. However, all this needs to be developed inside a dominant culture that is wary of all change. The acceleration of multiple crises paradoxically does not result in change.



CS: Let's talk about regulation. In *Atascados en la Plataforma* you wrote: "To ask corporations to please not collect data is naive. We will not see a revolution based only on regulation and fines". How can we overcome the limitations of regulation? What kind of political strategy or intervention should be activated?

GL: Some steps are easy to take. Monopolies can be broken up within months. Corporations like Google will need to remove from all (internet) governance bodies and there needs to be an immediate ban on lobbying in Brussels. This is an old demand and already proposed ages ago in the case of the pharmaceutical industry, the military-industrial complex, big agricultural firms and finance. These are easy-to-implement measures.

The debate about the long-term architecture of the 'public stack' is also taking shape but so far lacks pilots. The aim should be to create 'techno-diversity' (Yuk Hui). Labels such as 'techno-sovereignty' may sound attractive but we remain dependent on other parts of the world. I am not arguing for 'techno-autarchy'. I am wary of anti-American sentiments (even though the anti-imperialist strategies, particularly in Latin America, remain valid). Resentment is a bad doctor. Let's design other 'diversities'. First of all, let's distinguish between vital infrastructures that need to be local or regional hands such as water, energy and fibre optics but also food and health services (as the Covid period showed) and an additional planetary political economy. As you can see, I am sceptic about the national level and the ability to resolve any of the above, especially in the European context.

CS: It would seem that the debate on AI is displacing the conversations about the platforms... In this context: could we apply your statement about the limits of regulation to the corporations behind AI? If we do not advance in the regulation of AI, where should we put our efforts if we want to democratize and limit the side effects of this powerful technology?

GL: By now we understand more of the constant need of the big tech elite to distract and confuse its 'users'. There needs to be a constant disruption of public attention with the aim of not forgetting the previous issue. However, increasingly this no longer works as planned. I agree. AI is the perfect distraction. Its aim is to keep the attention away from the underlying platform question and related ownership questions. The relationship between the internet and AI as a parasitic technology has not yet been explicitly addressed but this is only a matter of time. Do you give consent to the AI firms to use your data and content, your texts, and images? Did

Wikipedia? The ‘training’ of AI systems is not an innocent activity, as all the bias studies have already sufficiently shown. This extractivist business will be a lucrative one.. until we organize a planetary data strike: stop the theft. No data for you, my dear AI, sort it out yourself. Show the world what your intelligence is all about-without the stolen data.