

Interview with Geert Lovink for the German Telepolis Online Magazine by
Claudia Wangerin

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q: First of all, let's talk about Internet and other addictions. It has been known for centuries that too much alcohol is harmful but many people still get addicted to it. Around 2.6 million people worldwide die from alcohol each year. Why are you convinced that people will turn away from the internet just because internet addiction is also harmful?

a: People may—or may not—turn away from social media because they are bored and have better things to do. We're not talking here about freely surfing the internet. When we read statistics that young people are on TikTok on average four hours a day this is not 'internet addiction' but the result of endless finetuning of one particular app, a subtle, subliminal interface design of short, 'funny' videos, a flow that simply doesn't stop. We need to swipe down, one more and more.

My argument has never been that social media are 'harmful'. They produce a rainbow of feelings that are different for everyone: while useful for some, others get sad and depressed, feel lonely, while again others gets angry and frustrated and start to feel bored. I am wary to 'medicalize' users. I respect and feel for them. I can rationally wonder why they do not revolt, as previous generations did: delete all that bullshit, forget all about it and start doing something else. Why do people comply so easily? This is mainly because these platforms are designed and steered by their own peers. We essentially look in a mirror and get obsessed with the cultivation of the online self. This does not feel like a conspiracy or manipulation from above by some evil, outside force and that makes the 'addiction' side so sneaky. I also do not believe in terms like 'fake news' and 'conspiracy theories' as an explanation of what's going on. It might be more interesting to call it fables or superstition. We need another vocabulary here. Real news from trusted sources... come on, this will not make a difference, but will decentralized networks? What's sure, we urgently need communication diversity. We long for discursive inclusivity. Come up with something unexpected. Debate yes, speculative imagination, yes please. Stop commenting on other people's turf and reopen the forums. In equal debates you have different contributions, not merely 'responses'. It is the sick, short replies that make people filled with hate. If there is going to be disagreement, then do it on equal terms and let's just delete the silly emoji functionality. There is already enough

simulation of participation.

q: You [deleted your facebook account](#) in 2010 as part of one of the first collective protests against its privacy violations. Why did you stick with Twitter for twelve years longer?

a: Up until Elon Musk took over Twitter, in October 2022, it was indeed a different medium compared to Google and the extractivist Meta complex of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp (and its close ties to the NSA). Are you aware of the progressive background of the Twitter founders? There was also the matter of scale. I never thought of Twitter as a platform. At the time it was less than 10% the size of Facebook. It is estimated that X has around 200 million daily users worldwide today (a majority of them being male, around 30). Since Musk's takeover there are no reliable stats anymore. I do not want to defend Twitter of the past - I never did and wasn't super active on it. I always believed in decentralized networks that we, here in Europe, would be able to maintain ourselves-and I am still committed to that. Much like LinkedIn, Twitter feels like a social network for certain professionals. After 2016 the political climate changed, the platform regression set in, in favour of techno-libertarian right-wing issues and networks. This was also the case on Twitter. But at least there were fights happening there about cultural hegemony. There was constant debate on moderation issues and the way algorithms worked. Then Musk threw out most of the staff and tweaked the content in his favour and I left (now he will even move HQ from San Francisco to Texas). For almost two years people are leaving X. It's been stagnating, but politicians and news junkies still use it extensively and this fact distorts the overall image. Radio, TV and news websites continue to pick up on what this or that politician was said on X. This needs to stop but that won't be an easy job. I do not expect a sudden exodus as the overall political climate in the West remains populist right-wing.

q: Twitter, now X, has always favoured simplified statements, even for complex problems, due to the limited number of characters in the free version. Did that never bother you [as someone who has more to say](#)?

a: I am glad you brought this up. Many must have forgotten the max 140 signs per posting rule that defined this 'microblogging' social networking site in the first decade. This is why I didn't quite know how to use Twitter in the early days without many 'followers', to be honest. Twitter was the one Web 2.0 that most aggressively promoting the 'updating' cult on the Net: I am doing this, I am feeling that, look at this, I proud of that etc. This was at a

time when we just deserted the email community space and started blogging (including commenting on the blog postings of others). Later on, when there were many more people on Twitter, one had a much better idea who exactly you were talking to. I then found out that Twitter could be used for slogans, quotes and aphorisms. I personally never used it to comment on world affairs or Dutch politics. It was also ideal as a pointer when I had new essay out, a translation, interview or online talk, people could easily find out this way. Right now we're using Telegram groups for this.

q: Where simplification is favoured right-wing populists have the advantage in "discussions". Nevertheless, some left-wing activists and journalists remained on X even when Elon Musk took over the platform. They did not want to give up the battle of opinions there. Others criticized this because it increased the importance and click numbers of a right-wing platform. Do you understand both positions?

a: Journalists and politicians are new junkies and hooked on their devices 24/7. These two groups feed off each other and in terms of social media alternatives are written off and completely uninteresting when it comes to radical imaginaries and 'cosmo-technics'. You cannot discuss social media ('addiction') with them as they get angry, immediately. If you want to talk about alternatives to X you will have to do that outside of the news and politics context. In general we should favour social networking tools that separate private and public spheres and do not mix up the two. This has been the secret success of Meta: they deliberately mix the realms of private conversations with friends and family, work, the sports club, neighbours etc. with that of news, celebrity and other influencers that offer us cooking recipes, cool places to visit, party announcements with that of ads. From this perspective it seems OK if journalists and their politicians have their own toy called X. It would be nice to design 'Uncool Twitter' campaign but we need to be prepared that not many will actually take notice of this. Soon right-wing populists will only have other 'friends' they can talk to. The battle over the hegemony of Twitter is over but nothing is lost. The internet is still a big place.

q: During the early August riots in Britain, Musk announced on X: "Civil war is inevitable." Do you think that everyone who does not want to fuel a civil war should boycott x from now on, at the latest?

a: We've known for many years that Silicon Valley benefits from fuelling conflicts and Musk really needs to turn the tide with this pet project and

start to make a profit. We know that advertisers are walking away in droves and he's actually suing them for that. I do not think that after Brexit we, at the European continent, have much to say about this particular case. Here in NL we have the Wilders government, you have AfD in Germany, France has got LePen and then there are Meloni and Orbán... Let's deal with those first.

I never studied the life and work of Musk. If you want to know more about that, follow Paris Marx and read how Émile Torres explains the [TESCREAL](#) ideology. There are some really good Musk analysts out there. The fun thing about Musk is that he's easy to provoke. You can say he doesn't care but maybe even Musk cannot afford to be outed as a fascist. Wilders, for instance, gets very angry when you call his an extreme right guy (he's entitled to call all his enemies members of the 'extreme left', of course). Maybe a taskforce could focus on such a Provo Operation. It should be possible to turn Musk into a social pariah. BTW, that may not happen via court cases. He remains the richest man in the world but at the level of memes it is really not all that difficult to make a fool of him. One needs some tactical insights how info warfare is working today, and there you go.

q: Unlike X, TikTok is not owned by a white, right-wing billionaire. In parts of German society the Chinese platform has a bad reputation because China is labelled as an enemy. On the other hand, in the West, TikTok mainly reaches young people. German right-wing extremists were successful at that platform with their videos... Some lefties and other democrats started to call: „Reclaim TikTok“. Their idea is to distribute your own content there to reach young people. What do you think about?

a: The phrase 'reclaim' is a bit strange in this context as TikTok never was progressive in the first place (unlike Twitter). If young people, native on TikTok, feel the urge to hit back, let them do so but we do not need some 'old farts' to sign up and post their well-intended content. In terms of surveillance, ads, data extraction and ugly forms of addiction, TikTok is even worse than Silicon Valley so I would never idealize them, just because their parent company is Chinese. This is only taking us away from the more important, strategic question we, Europeans, need to ask ourselves: why can Brussels only come up with fines and never just ban or breakup monopolies? It is no longer rocket science to develop your own social networking sites... Brussels in the firm hands of consultancy firms, large IT companies such as Microsoft and traditional telecom giants that know how to lobby. Their power needs to be broken first. We also need to understand that 'free

software' and 'open source' are compromised terms that will no longer do the job in this context. Geeks never cared about social media - and this an issue. But most of all, we need to have confidence that this is something that can be fixed in a few years... The 'social media' drama cannot be compared with the unfolding climate catastrophe. Social media sovereignty is entirely doable.

q: Teenagers were exposed to psychological stress and loneliness due to the corona crisis. Some of them have become addicted to the internet because it seems to them to be the only way out of loneliness. Some adults feel the same way but young people were unable to gain important experiences during their developmental phase. How should these people discover the [benefits of "digital detox"](#)?

a: I would say so, yes. But this should not be part of a top-down government approach. That will backfire and will work against the promotion of European public alternatives that are not based on secretive data extraction and ad-based profit models. What does surprise me why it took so long to figure out that having smart phone in the class rooms of primary and high schools wasn't such a good idea. Media literacy is still urgent, including programming skills for young kids: program or be programmed. What exact techno-social skills need to be taught should be discussed. Computer literacy among young people has dropped dramatically over the past decades. But apart from that, even more important is the task to turn the tide with basic reading and writing skills. Reading is essential for critical thinking and should be disassociated from the dusty image of thick, boring books no one is interested in. There is a lack of visual literacy as well. The future of the online world will depend on the ability of young people to develop their own critical framework, regardless whether this is text or images.

q: Many of these young people are influenced by right-wing ideology. Right-wing ideologists seem to respond to their needs, especially those of young, insecure men. The Internet plays an important role in political debate, including in the mobilisation of protest movements, regardless of whether democratic forces welcome this or not. How should they deal with it?

a: This is so urgent what you're addressing here, maybe even more so than all of the above. While the 'mental impact' of social media platforms primarily have been researched for (young) women (incl. girl theory), the impact on young males has been ignored. What at first looked like sexual frustration and anger management issues is now clearly having political

implications. We have not done enough and should have drawn conclusions from the somewhat puzzling attraction earlier on to figures such as Jordan Peterson, Andrew Tate and sites like 4Chan, Reddit and now X (incl. a vast, related YouTube video sphere). Economic distress is playing a key role in this context. Precarity is taking a toll and male frustrations are in search who's to blame. The 'woke' left has little to offer to these isolated guys in terms of alternative masculinity role models. Open conflict seems to become inevitable. Again, this is also a design question. While the left finally figured out 'how to meme', this should also be applied to libidinal symbolism.