(This is my contribution to *From Net, City, World to Cloud, Market, Sea – Metaphors of the Internet*, edited by Zentrum für Netzkunst (Tereza Havlíková, Julia Kochanek and Anneliese Ostertag). The book is published by Distanz Verlag in Berlin, more information here). Awareness about the the productive link between metaphors and computer networks goes back many decades. For instance, see our debates in Amsterdam in 1993 over the choice how to call our local public access initiative, which then was named The Digital City (see more on www.dds.nl in my book *Dark Fiber* and here). Marianne van den Boomen, who was an active member of DDS, wrote her PhD about the topic of Internet and Metaphors, which INC published in 2014 as #14 of the Theory on Demand series, just before she passed away. It's always amazing to see that this pioneering work is still widely referenced. It's called *Transcoding the Digital: How Metaphors Matter in New Media*.)

—

What's Social Networking Today?

By Geert Lovink

"We regret to inform you that your virtual self is statistically unlovable." Acid Horizon – "Living my truth is exhausting… I'm going to start living my lie from now on." Dee – "You have the opportunity to leave a one-star review." – What you can't see, won't hurt you – Headline: "New Study Shows Engaging in Online Discourse Is Equivalent to Smoking 5 Packs of Cigarettes." – "I use technology in order to hate it properly." Nam June Paik – "You're not responsible for the version of you that exists in others' minds" @browntopink – "I cannot remember the social media postings I've read any more than the meals I have eaten; even so, they have made me." Emerson – "Against whom do we ever struggle if not against our own double?" Yves Bonnefoy

It is rumoured that social networks still exist in the interior of the platform.[1] While groups inside the cave try to interact while watching the projected spectacle, all they can produce is subliminal likes and ironic emojis: weak signs of ties that are about to dissolve. In this worldmaking redux, there are no longer contributions, only responses. A 'gathering of the tribe' outside the cave may sound attractive but

where is it happening? Inside the social cave, networks are optional, temporary group chats, anxiously responding to the real existing acceleration of unfolding crises. All this unfolds in an age of 'optionalism', driven by the attitude that life is a menu card, normalizing the habit of changing one's choice well after you place the order.

Take the event planning *Partiful* app that facilitates optional living into a one-stop shop: "The easiest way to get your guests on the same page."[2] The "5 will go, 3 maybe"[3] logic polls your guest who can then pick the option. "Texting, Stories, and group chats don't cut it, especially when you're inviting friends-of-friends. You deserve a party page that hypes up your event and makes it easier for guests to get the info they need."[2] The aim is to cultivate the Other as an Option ("I may not want to talk to you but still check you out."). The app facilitates digital sniffing which could be defined as the active sampling of through the visual cavity for the purpose of information acquisition. *Partiful* has a solution for the current need to automate quick social scans: "Everyone's too busy for awkward 1:1 meetups with strangers. We want to make it easier to get to know friends-of-friends casually in group settings while having the time of your life."[4] In the end, the 'friend' turns out unsavoury, dank yet out-of-date because of inevitable imperfections. It makes life easy to outsource and automate the selection process. Thank God there's *Partiful*.

While previous social media platforms were designed to give away content for free (in exchange for data extraction and ads), a growing number of niche social networks are centred around monetization. While crypto might be over its hype, it is still used by millions, creating networks on its own. What's exchanged here are not just tokens but the metadata of the transactions themselves. Besides Kickstarter, Patreon, GoFundMe and Substack, there are adult sites like OnlyFans and Sunroom ("Get Paid to Exist"), "a space for women to earn by creating content and connecting with their communities."[5] The user no longer wants to be used. Instead, 'creators' interact with 'supporters' by posting "casual life updates, personal shares, juicy stories, behind-the-scenes, and photoshoots."[6] Sunroom is run by and for women, promising to "always take context into consideration and promise to never automate a decision which affects the livelihood of a creator"—an indicator that people are fed up with algorithmic

decisions, custom services run by bots, resulting in shadow banning and random censorship.

Search engines politely refuse to come up with suggestions while querying the term ‘social network’. While Google points at the 2010 Hollywood film about the early days of Facebook, DuckDuckGo bluntly replaces the term with social media. Since the takeover of internet-based social media the word ‘network’ is associated by machines with ‘real-world connections’. The techno-social power, in denial of its own network past, is reducing the term to the all-too-human interaction realm. Take the Centre Pompidou in Paris which hosted the exhibition entitled *Worlds of Networks* (back in the spring of 2022), a small but significant sign that the museumization of networks is on its way.[3] If the internet was once defined as a ‘network of networks’, the question is justified whether this planetary-scale infrastructure of cables, G5 towers and datacentres are ‘dead inside’: bots and AI generating data that generate more data. After the digitization of everything the system no longer needs human input. In line with this, I introduced the ‘extinction internet’ notion from a ‘platform-in-the-age-climate-collapse’ perspective.[4]

Let’s zoom into the pop mythology around the ‘dead internet theory’ that started to circulate widely in 2021. It states that content is mainly produced by bots and LLMs such as ChatGTP are curated by algorithms to “manipulate the population and minimize organic human activity.” [5] Others describe the dire state of the digital public sphere with the phrase that the ‘internet is broken’. Already in the first sentence, the related Wikipedia page frames the topic as “conspiracy theory.” The issue here is how to relate a culture of suspicion about online content and viral social media messages to the medium as such. Take the legend of creepypasta[6] that has taken over all channels and has sunken deep down onto the protocol level where Google and Meta engineers have taken control of governance bodies, securing vital nodes and pathways, making it impossible to reverse the wave of content automation. Here we see that a paranoid phantasy and political platform criticism are getting dangerously close. This is the negative vortex at work. While critical theory perceives it as its task to investigate mental conditions inside the ‘platopticon’, its outcomes cannot naively claim that it is merely working for the greater good of enlightenment and progress.[7]

The proclamation that ‘networks are dead’ is old news in terms of communicative degrees of freedom, limited GUI functionality and standardized ironic responses, given the absence of control over black boxes. It’s not tech but the popular mood has that altered. As Harold Rosenberg already wrote in 1959, the “intellectualization of kitsch is justified on the grounds that mass society, whether we like it or not, is going to stay with us into the foreseeable future; hence its popular culture cannot be left to the populace.”[8] In her book *Exit Reality* (org. in Italian, 2023), Valentina Tanni no longer spends any thoughts about the social loss and misery of the platform condition.[9] What’s left of the internet is an inner trip through empty, clean liminal spaces. The net is no longer a social space that debates and then acts. We see reality shifting once mass loneliness is presented as a given. The ‘Covid’ lockdown has been the new normal for a decade. What’s in demand is 1990s nostalgia, a pixelated urge to relive 64K modem memories. There are no longer collective goals outside the consumption of bizarware, from traumacore, weirdcore and dreamcore to corecore. The essence here is the shared aesthetics itself, exploring the lore of backrooms on the uncanny tunes of vaporwave. Once the threshold is passed, the processual nightmare can no longer be distinguished from the magic experienced in dream village. Tanni enthusiastically reports about her journey down the rabbit hole “that is not just deep but bottomless.” And only with a constant production of new vibes, the mood can remain optimistic. When the world is cake, there is always more to explore.

The architecture of the one-shop social media platforms has made it all but impossible to focus on the original function of ‘social networking’—a necessary first step to come to self-organization and mobilization in terms of protest and counter-hegemonic structures. It has all become a blurry experience with personal messages, updates from influencers and news sites mixed with ads, updating itself constantly, making it hard to stop scrolling to focus on tasks and exchanges beyond likes and hearts. What in the past was called the promotion of ‘weak ties’ to artificially grow your number of followers has now turned into the cultivation of one-sided para-social relationships that can easily give the suggestion of pseudo-networks that constantly need to be maintained (due to high traffic).[10] What some called ‘manufactured authenticity’ is in fact a return to couch potato logic of the earlier TV era.

The earlier network paradigm suggested free-floating, liberated subjects that freely connect, and are on the move to explore, in search of associations that work for them. The platform logic, on the other, paints the user as a helpless, lazy customer who is vulnerable to fake news, bribery, hacks, and deceptive friendships with celebs. The platform is offering the helpless sheep protection inside the massive herd: maybe I won't be the one hit by the virus. "The user is too wicked to be free." (after de Maistre). The digital subject can no longer survive outside of the platform realm. With no alternative networks in sight, exhaustion and collapse become the last hope.

Decades ago, networks were promoted as liberatory tools, to free individuals from the closed, oppressed communities such as the family, village and the church. Networks would emphasize self-determination over fixed gender, race and class determinations. But not even a decade into the golden age of the networks, centralized identity platforms cracked down on anonymous experiments, dividing information society, once again, into fixed identity realms in which open networks were replaced by echo chambers and filter bubbles, fuelled by culture wars that further consolidate identity politics. Offline social bonds and long-term commitments are falling apart. Nowadays, identity is a task and no longer a given, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it.[11] As he described it, we are talking to strangers about other strangers. The safety of the platform, in contrast with the uncertainty and fluidity of the network, helps to overcome the fear of not being accepted, and of not being seen and recognized by others. This is the game, platform providers play with loneliness—the most widespread anxiety in mass society. In a society that constantly changes, what remains the same is the collection of apps on the smartphone. We're constantly forgetting—except to go back to the social networks to check the latest updates. We commit to the platform.

There is enough reason to complain about artists, unable to delete Instagram and campaigns discovering the 'vibe shift' of using political memes on TikTok and YouTube. From Signal, Telegram, Discord and Mastodon to Matrix there are multitudes of alternatives— the self-managed Fediverse servers are ready to be installed and utilized. The same can be said of the 'organized networks' concept, developed by Ned Rossiter and me since 2005, which argues to replace weak links

platforms with strong links networks that can be best qualified as a message in a bottle for better times.[12]

The issue of today is not the heroic fight between utopian alternatives and the evil mainstream but one of scaling up now or rather working on new beginnings through a ‘habit shift’. Can event-driven social movements afford to leave behind Big Tech, knowing that they own the heads and minds of millennials and GenZ? The irony of today’s activism is that most of the infighting and ‘woke’ identity politics plays itself out on US-owned corporate platforms, not outside it—let alone against. This line of thought can easily end in a blame game, setting up neo-liberal subjects against each other. The dawn of the network may as well be read as an immanent techno-social capitalist logic, an a-moral product of its of own hyper-optimization process.

Let’s end with a contemporary case, the Italian Reclaim the Tech movement that started in 2022 and has so far been centred in Bologna and Naples. Reclaim the Tech can be read as the new generation’s answer to the stagnation of previous alternative tech agendas, from open access, free software and open source, creative commons to social media campaigns, ‘tactical’ use of Second Life and similar adventures in VR and games, also known as the metaverse. Contemporary radical feminist, queer and ecological agendas that address power relations in tech are vital insights that need to be addressed and then implemented in code, design and architecture. Its tools so far are the website (https://reclaimthetech.it/) and a Telegram group (https://t.me/reclaimthetech). Climate change and extractivism are real and no longer marginal topics. AI is designed to consume substantial amounts of electricity. This is the core of today’s capitalist strategies. Decolonizing tech is not just one of many possible issues: it goes to the core of today’s value production. Let’s not be liberal here and naively celebrate a multitude of possible micro struggles. What’s urgent? What’s to be done? Build anti-drone weapons? Stop the building of more datacentres?

Let’s ask first: what does it mean to reclaim? At the time, the UK 1990s movement ‘Reclaim the Streets’ aimed to retake the street as a free public space, against police repression and surveillance but also against the car as the dominant mode of transportation in cities. This, in turn, built on a 1977 feminist protest called ‘Reclaim the

Night' against patriarchal violence. To reclaim means to take back lost territory. What does this mean for the 'tech' context? Is the answer still 'program or be programmed', as the 2011 Douglas Rushkoff booklet was called?

Those not prepared to talk about platforms should also remain silent about tech. Platforms are the hegemonic form of social organization (albeit a subconscious one, rarely noted. Today's platforms are regressing further under the sign of 'techno-feudalism'. A movement that claims to develop alternative paths in this field, needs to take this into account. Reclaim the Tech is not an empty gesture. Regulation through fines will not make any difference. Many come to the point that organizing collective forms of refusal (in particular regarding AI) will be the way to go. Refusal requires a public stand that implies possible personal implications.

One of the Reclaim the Tech organizers, Luca Recano, explains that the network has so far not been technologically self-sufficient. "The contradiction between small-scale networks, platforms and planetary infrastructures is there, from the geopolitical level to that of autonomous forms of social organisation and everyday life."[13] The idea of Reclaim the Tech is to simultaneously move 'with, against and beyond' the boundaries of technologies and address a range of issues, not just the 'male geek' free software/open source trope, but open it up to gender and post-colonial agendas. Abandoning the platforms in which friends and communities are still 'trapped' is hard while in immediate contradiction with the proclaimed autonomy. For Luca diversity cannot only be a claim. For RtT to embrace diversity „also means to challenge principles and assumptions with people and communities who share the same concerns and oppression but not the same tools used for decoding, organizing and subversion. The learning environment has to be reciprocal, a-synchronic and not pacified. To develop relationships with teachers, students, developers, activists, engineers, lawyers, journalists, researchers and artists of different ages and cultural-political-social backgrounds means opening up dialogues about diverse forms of criticism so that experiments about 'militant' uses of technology can be shared."

Sandro Mezzadra, writing from Bologna, urges us to contest notions such as stack and planetary computation and argues for a

multiplication of stacks (read: against the luring offers of Microsoft and Google for an easy and affordable all-in-one cloud solution as offered to many education and small firms while raising prices once customers are hooked). However, tensions between local networks and the current geo-politics is becoming a bigger and bigger issue. “What we call the ‘network form’ is more and more constitutive of the very nature of social movements and multiple attempts to confront, even hijack the ‘planetary infrastructure’ are underway. I was struck by Rodrigo Nunes’ book *Neither vertical nor horizontal*. It is a good way to rethink the issue of political organization from the angle of an environmental network theory.”[14] Following from here it remains important to experiment with alternative architectures that position themselves in between ‘data sovereignty’, independent media and autonomous forms of self-organization.

Franco Berardi, also writing from Bologna, responded in a different way, admitting that he has been unable to think about the future. “This is very bad, I know, but it is a sort of blindness. My point of view is the point of view of a mother who has lost her children because of a bomb (Israeli, or Russian, whatever…) She does not imagine a future because she does not want a future. I’ve come to the point that I do not wish for any improvement, because everything is lost. For me (in my opinion) after Gaza there is no possibility of joy anymore. If you ask me what is going to be the future of the net I cannot think of anything but war. Of course I am wrong. Also Adorno was wrong when he said that after Auschwitz poetry was impossible. Maybe the young friends of Reclaim the tech will be able to invent joy after Gaza but I don’t want to know about this. You remember the words of Gershom Sholem: “The Messiah will come, but I don’t want to see Him.”[15]

Emanuele Braga from Milan answered days after returning from the Westbank. “The idea that surveillance as a technique of military and colonial subjugation is real has only grown stronger in my mind. It’s all already there, as an advanced laboratory: facial recognition, mobility control, electronic bracelets to monitor workers, the use of data provided by global platforms to profile political positioning and freedom of speech, all linked to the trigger of a machine gun. The social aspect begins with a camera, becomes a platform, and transforms into a prison or a missile launched by a drone.”[16] Instead of ‘another internet’ Braga wants to start with the issue of land and

money. “Alternative networks to the platform that wages war have understood that the lever for emancipation is first of all economic: food, water and money sovereignty, In Palestine there’s a movement that refuses funds from the post-Oslo donor economy because they come with unacceptable conditions. In response, they are creating unconditional common funds.”

This fits into the trajectory Braga and others outlined in the development of alternative economic spaces, the discussion around Art for UBI and the conversation initiated by Lumbung since the 2022 Documenta fifteen, creating what he calls “a new front against toxic philanthropy. The construction of unconditional and self-managed common funds could be the most fertile ground for founding networks.” Tech sovereignty starts with generating one’s own revenue streams, bringing down donor dependency and building autonomous ‘perma computing’ – a movement that knows how to repair while scaling up with hybrid solutions, mixing the real and the virtual, old and new tech, local and global.

—

Notes:

[1] It is no longer productive to present the rhizome as an alternative to the tree and it root structure. We’re stuck in the tree (structure). See Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Rhizom*, Berlin, 1977, who, in fact, discuss the possibility of having rhizomes inside the tree structure but this can never be qualified as ‘inner exile’. Only an exodus from the platform as structure and metaphor might open up up collective imaginary spaces again. Only then the rhizome might be considered as one thousand possible metaphor that could be turned into a productive-subversive concept machine (to stay in 1970s lingo).

[2] https://partiful.com/: “Plan events in seconds (literally).”

[3] https://networkcultures.org/geert/2022/03/09/worlds-of-networks-centre-pompidou-ircam-exhibit-conference/.

[4] https://networkcultures.org/blog/publication/extinction-internet/.

[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Internet_theory.

[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creepypasta.

[7] See Vladen Joler's video https://extractivism.online/ in which he is introducing this term, merging Plato's cave with Bentham's panopticon: "In this assemblage of allegories, millions of caves or prison cells form the unique and invisible panopticon[6] structure. The central tower of this structure has two main functions: (1) to project the content on the walls of the caves and (2) to surveil and capture the digital shadows of the prisoners reflected on the opposite wall."

[8] Quoted in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, Penguin Books, New York, 2006, p. 194.

[9] Valentina Tanni, *Exit Reality*, Aksioma/NERO, Rome/Ljubljana, 2024.

[10] For more on this see Linh Smooke's blog posting: https://linhdaosmooke.com/blog/confession-of-a-millennial-fangirl-on-parasocial-relationships-internet-celebrities-amp-social-media.

[11] Quoted from Zygmunt Bauman's lecture at 2015 Re-Publica conference in Berlin, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGk-iaTr9hk.

[12] Work on the concept has been brought together in Geert Lovink & Ned Rossiter, *Organization After Social Media*, Minor Composition, Colchester, 2017.

[13] Quotes from an email exchange, July 24, 2024.

[14] Quotes from an email exchange, July 27, 2024.

[15] Quotes from an email exchange, July 29, 2024.

[16] Quotes from an email exchange, July 25, 2024. For more on his work, see https://instituteofradicalimagination.org/.