

Requiem for the Network

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Requiem for the Network by Geert Lovink

“In the final stage of his ‘liberation’ and emancipation through the networks, screens and technologies, the modern individual becomes a fractal subject, both subdivisible to infinity and indivisible, closed on himself and doomed to endless identity. In a sense, the perfect subject, the subject without other—whose individuation is not at all contradictory with mass status.” Jean Baudrillard[1]

This is the age of network extinction. Small is trivial. Notorious vagueness and non-commitment on the side of slackerish members killed the once cute, postmodern construct of networks. Platforms did the rest. Decentralization may be the flavour of the day, but no one is talking about networks anymore as a solution for the social media mess. Where have all the networks gone?

In this age of the subject without a project, there is no ‘underground’ anymore. Building one, two, three, many networks as alternatives to crumbling institutions such as trade unions or political parties once was a fashionable post-cold war tactic. Back then, networks were also seen by shady agencies like RAND as stealth technologies able to infiltrate, disrupt and penetrate rogue states or actors perceived as enemies to the US world order. Introduced in the 1980s in banking as ‘financial networks’, followed by the democratization of the internet, the concept has now reached the status of ‘gesunkenes Kulturgut’. Is it the ‘open’, informal character that killed the network or rather the absence of a collective will to do anything much more than feed on click-bait?

For TechCrunch writer Romain Dillet the term social network has become a meaningless association of words. “Chances are you have dozens, hundreds or maybe thousands of friends and followers across multiple platforms. But those crowded places have never felt so empty.”[2] He concludes that the concept of wide networks of social ties with an element of broadcasting is dead. What killed the network is the never-ending push to add more “people

you may know.” More equals better and aligns with the capitalist imperative of perpetual growth. In the logic of social networks, accumulating more friends is equivalent to a firm demonstrating a strong capacity to expand its market reach. Yet a sad emptiness accompanies the mass individualization of the cult of personality. “Knowing someone is one thing, but having things to talk about is another.” Blaming dark pattern design in a desperate attempt to push even more ads, tech companies will do whatever it takes to grow. The result: “As social networks become bigger, content becomes garbage.” Instead of entering the political debate on how to break up these monopolies and build meaningful alternative tools that can replace the platforms, Dillet comes up with the cheap digital detox gesture. “Put your phone back in your pocket and start a conversation. You might end up discussing for hours without even thinking about the red dots on all your app icons.” Is it possible to re-imagine the social and not blame ourselves for being weak, addicted individuals?

In the meantime, networks have elegantly been removed from the tech vocabulary. You will search in vain for the term in the books that capture the state of the internet such as Nick Srnicek’s *Platform Capitalism* (2015), Benjamin Bratton’s *The Stack* (2016) or Shoshana Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019). Even activist literature rarely uses the term anymore. The mathematical and social science-driven ‘network theory’ has been dead for over a decade. The left never made an attempt to own the concept. If anyone did, it was ‘global civil society’, a hand-picked collection of NGOs that played around with Manuel Castells’ *Network Society* in an attempt to enter the realm of institutional politics at a transnational level. The distribution of power over networks turned out to be nothing but a dream. The valorisation of flat hierarchies, a notion especially endorsed by ‘the network is the message’ advocates, has been replaced by a platform system driven by influencers who are ‘followed’ in a passive-aggressive mode by everyone else without consequence. Instead of a redistribution of wealth and power we feverishly continue to ‘network’ under the calibrated eye of platform algorithms.

In the meanwhile, whatever happened to the network idea? For this essay I have made the rounds, visiting different continents, to consult how fellow activists, artists and researchers estimate the sorry status of networks today. I started off with Dutch post-digital art critic Nadine Roestenburg who believes that millennials and Gen-Z see networks as a given, “an underlying structure that no longer takes a fixed shape. Everybody and everything is

always connected to each other, there is no longer a white space between the nodes. The network has exploded into a void; a hyper-object too big, too complex for our understanding. Meaning is lost in meaningfulness and therefore we are desperately searching for a starting point, a single node that can reconnect us. This explains the popularity of digital detoxes, mindfulness, meditation. In arts, psychogeography, as a tool to trace the physical of the digital, a requiem for understanding starting at visualising the invisible network structure.”[3]

Nadine suggested I contact Bay area-based Jenny Odell, author of *How to do Nothing*. She wrote back: “One thing hasn’t changed is that we require certain contexts in order for speech and action to be meaningful. There is such a big difference between 1) saying things in a group where you are recognized, and which has convened (physically or digitally) around a specific purpose, and 2) shouting into an anonymous void, having to package your expressions in a way that will grab the attention of strangers who have no context for who you are and what you’re saying. Both in group chats and in-person meetings, I’m amazed at how things actually get *done* rather than just *said*, with people being able to build off of the expertise of others in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Social media, through the process of context collapse, makes this kind of thing impossible by design.”[4]

Jenny Odell believes it is worth revisiting and defending ideas of decentralized federation “because the model preserves the aspects of sociality that make the most of the individual and the group. Looking back at the history of activism, the decentralized form shows up over and over again. The density of the nodes allows people to form real relationships, and the connections between the nodes allow them to share knowledge quickly. To me, this represents the possibility of innovating new ideas and solutions—rather than one-off, mic-drop statements and a bunch of ‘connected’ individuals simply spinning their wheels.”

Let’s get unfashionable and dig up an Adorno quote from *Critical Models* to recast into the social media age: “The old established authorities decayed and were toppled, while the people psychologically were not ready for self-determination. They proved to be unequal to the freedom that fell into their laps.”[5] This is what networks require: an active form of self-determination. Self-organization from below is the precise opposite of smooth interfaces, automated imports of address books and algorithmic ‘governance’ of one’s news and updates. Self-determination is not something you download and

install for free. During the turbulent 1990s centralized information systems lost their power and legitimacy, but instead of smaller networks that claimed to be more democratic and—in theory—promote autonomy and people’s sovereignty, all we got were even larger, more manipulative monopoly platforms. Self-determination is an act, a political event, and precisely not a software feature.

Like any form of social organization, networks need to be set-up, built and maintained. Unlike mapping software seems to suggest, networks are not just generated on the spot, as if they were machine-generated entities. We’re not talking here about automated correlations. Forget the visual snapshots. Networks are structured by protocols and their underlying infrastructures; they are not free-floating entities. What’s of interest in times of depression and despair is their vitalism, not merely a network’s birth or cause of death. Once networks start to grow on their own, they may develop in unexpected directions, flourish but then stagnate. They can also fork and are just as easily abandoned as they were once started. Unlike other forms of organizations the political charm of networks lies in their ability to create new beginnings, much in the same spirit as Hannah Arendt writes about the miraculous energy that is unleashed when we are beginning anew.^[6] Rethinking networks as tools to create new beginnings can lure us away from ‘collapsology’^[7] and push aside the never-ending obsession with the finality of this world.

The informal character may invite unknown outsiders to join networks, yet this often leads to a culture of non-commitment and informal hierarchies and power plays by those that are most active. What are we supposed to do? Respond? Like? Retweet? This uncertainty is part of the network architecture when you do not have pseudo-activity through likes, clicks and views. Networks are easy to join—and abandon. They do not require formal membership nor the creation of a profile (usually the creation of a random username and password is all that’s required). However, networks do not fall out of the sky, even though the sudden events such as riots and flash mobs seem to suggest otherwise. On platforms these ups and downs are being replaced (or should we say: overcome) by a constant stream of messages. Instead of inviting us to act, we spend most of our time keeping up-to-date, constantly in a state of mild-panic trying work through the backlog of Tweets missed over the past few days or updates ignored on your favorite social media platform (yes, the same one as everyone you know is on). Depleted and too wiped out to do anything else, we’re left contemplating in a near-

comatose condition the now well-known feeling of the void. Emptiness amplified with nothing better to do. That's one of the primary affective consequences of the mass training program for an automated future. Platforms establish a psychic blockade to think and act (to put it in Mark Fisher's terms). Their 'service design' is such that we're no longer lured into taking action. Instead, we express our outrage or concern. These are the 'networks without a cause' that invite us to respond to each and every event with a stripped-down opinion, basic signs, responses.

In Italy, a country where the term 'social networks' is still circulating, the debate over the current state of the social is as lively as ever. Writing in response to my thesis on the death of the network in the age of platform capitalism, Tiziana Terranova, author of *Network Cultures* (2004), believes that "if we can look back at the network age it would be possible only because we seem to be at the highest point of the network wave—a mathematical abstraction derived from and implemented into communication technologies which still completely dominates and organises the epistemic space of contemporary societies. What we probably can look back on, and many of us are, is the hopeful time of networks, when it was still possible to see new possibilities in the network topos, rather than just the re-organization of power. It might be possible to perceive, even now, what networks might eventually give in to, something emerging at the very limits of hyperconnectedness and the proliferation of correlations that have displaced modern notions of causality. If I had to place a bet on what this something might be, I would put it on technologies that employ quantum-theoretical models of entanglement (rather than connectedness) and 'spooky' models of causality. It might be possible that this is where new technologies of power and struggles for emancipation from the grip of economic, social and cultural relations might have to unfold." [8] Translating this within my own framework, I have to think of 'unlikely networks'. Precisely not family and high-school friends and colleagues but seemingly random strangers, in a much weirder and radical way than algorithms are now selecting partners on dating apps. Event-driven entanglements are important here."

In his interview collection *Facebook entkommen* from 2018, the Austrian researcher Raimund Minichbauer neatly sums up the stagnation artists, activists and researchers find themselves in ever since 2011 when the last renaissance of social movements and 'indy' social networking attempts were made before the final lock-in. Much to the surprise of insiders, most

autonomous groups and social centres still use Facebook to announce their activities. Similar to the considerations in Minichbauer's book is the Institute of Network Cultures' *Unlike Us* network that embodies a similar attempt to combine social media critique with the promotion of alternatives. Despite two waves of public interest, one after the 2013 revelations of Snowden, the other in the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal in early 2018, nothing has fundamentally changed. Even though we know a lot more about 'behavior modifications' and the 'abuse' of user data, these insights have not led to a significant change in platform dependencies.

While the list of alternative apps steadily grows, how can activists be so openly cynical about their own alternatives? And what does this say about the level of 'regression' in Western societies when even the most engaged activists are so 'liberal' about Facebook? Is it laziness? Is the fear of being isolated justified? Once upon a time, alternative communication infrastructure was considered vital to the survival of the scene. This varied from zines to bookstores, independent distribution to print shops, free/pirate radio stations to autonomous internet servers and related ISPs. Speaking in Minichbauer's book data activist-researcher Stefania Milan explains the move to what she coined 'cloud protesting', when activists no longer directly respond to incidents such as police violence but instead become instant reporters by grabbing their phone to upload the incriminating evidence to social media platforms, as Milan once witnessed when the Occupy camp in Toronto was evicted. Stefania Milan prefers to speak of 'mobilizations' rather than 'movements' and notices the contradiction between horizontal decision structures during events (such as the human microphones) and the absolute lack thereof in the technical infrastructures that are utilized.[\[9\]](#)

Minichbauer points at another sensitive issue where social movements, geeks and technology designers have not made any progress: the 'community' question. Mark Zuckerberg's systematic abuse of the term is on full display when he is talking about 'his' 2.4 billion Facebook users as if there were one 'global community'.[\[10\]](#) As Minichbauer suggests, it is easy to dismiss the appropriation of the term—and we should continue to deconstruct such shallow corporate definitions—but this should not lead us into a position in which we reject any form of mutual aid and (free) cooperation with others out of fear that all our social interaction might be tracked, mapped and commodified. As Haraway stated: we should stay with the trouble. Community is either a living entity that exists, here and now, with all its contradictions and mishaps, as 'we' have something in common, a

commons, or it is a dead entity that should no longer be invoked (as we're in search for other forms of the social). As studies of kinship show, many people are glad to escape the strains of close-knit living, as Jon Lawrence writes in *The Guardian*: "If we abandon vague aspirations to rediscover an idealised vision of community that never existed and focus instead on small-scale, practical initiatives to foster social connection and understanding, we stand a chance of weathering the present crisis with our social fabric intact."[\[11\]](#)

"Whether we acknowledge it or not, the world is placing its bets on which system will survive the coming era of destabilizing non-linear change: inflexible, opaque Central Planning or flexible, self-organizing networks of decentralized autonomy and capital."[\[12\]](#) This is the choice that we have presented ourselves with over the past decades. A diverse coalition, consisting of liberal business elites and geek entrepreneurs and activists, have systematically overlooked the possibility that the internet as a platform would one day be the Central Planning Committee. Silicon Valley used the network logic in order to advance a ruthless process of hyper-growth at all cost, and then dumped the network logic altogether. Once the address books were copied and the networks were properly 'mapped', their diffuse and 'rhizomatic' structure became a nuisance in favour of clearly defined, profile-centric 'graphs' in which users act with products and 'friends'.

Strangely enough, the demise of the network logic has not yet been properly theorized. Networks have become a secondary invisible layer in 'the stack'.[\[13\]](#) A 'remediation' effect (as once described by Bolter and Grusin) has come into play: the content of the platform is the network. However, this can only happen if the list of 'friends' or 'followers' actually constitutes an active network. Platforms are worthless if they consist of fake or dead networks. Platforms only come into being—and generate their desired extractive value—if there are actual exchanges and interactions happening—on a scale that goes beyond a certain critical mass. Automated exchanges between machines can simulate the social (as in the case of bots) but such fake traffic can only work if they are additional and parasitic—on their own they are soon noticed as worthless. Without humans such as sys administrators, moderators, software developers and network maintainers, any platform immediately stops functioning. One forgotten patch and the system breaks down. Anyone can set up a website, run an app, or host a network, but only very few can vacuum it all up and bring it all together onto one meta-level.

In Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) networks aren't even mentioned. Perhaps it is too much of a technological term? Instead of networks, Zuboff discusses terms developed by behavioural scientists such as Skinner and Pentland to describe animal group behaviour such as 'hives' and 'herds'. Zuboff then contrasts these zoological terms with the human need for the 'sanctuary' of the 'home'. The new frontier of power is data extraction of the 'behavioural surplus' with the aim to resell these data in the form of prediction products. As Zuboff puts it: "Surveillance capitalism has *human* nature in its sight." [14] The surveillance capitalist logic is one where we go from extraction to prediction and modification. Unlike artists, theorists and activists once feared, it was not the precious informal social relations that were being appropriated by machines (and thus compromised). The prime target is the mind, brain, behaviour, not the 'social noise'. Despite what the often used 'social media' label suggests, there is neither a social nor mediation element in Zuboff's universe.

The network form embodies a constructivist view of society in which the social is not merely a technical protocol and a given but is utilized as a vital element that need to be created, maintained and taken care of. Without human care networks immediately fall into disrepair. This position is in stark contrast with the instrumental view of Silicon Valley but also science & technology scholars that indulge in their admiration for autopoietic automation without the cranky wetware, always ready to spoil the party. Networks embody the 'all too human' aspects: they are vulnerable, moody, unpredictable, sometimes boring or rather excessive, and yes, sometimes out of control. These characteristics can all be 'managed' and 'administrated' through moderation, filtering, censorship and 'algorithmic governance', but cannot simply be eliminated.

What happens when we start to look at social media from an instrumentalist point of view and apply this Skinner dogma to today's platforms: "A person does not act upon the world, the world acts upon him"? Against most 'cultural studies' approaches that emphasize the neo-liberal subjectivity of the competitive self, for Zuboff there is no individuality anymore. As part of the herd we're programmed to do what our digital instinct tells us to do. In her classic sociological view, informed by Durkheim, there is little room left for agency. These days the weakened neo-liberal subjects are no longer considered self-confident actors. The good old times when British cultural studies discovered subversive appropriation hiding in the light of passive consumers are over. We urgently need agency—yet we don't have it. The

online billions are frowned upon as busy bees working for the Valley or seen as (addicted) victims in the latest conspiracy, meant to stir their tastes and opinions.

How did this 'Netzvergessenheit' occur? Once a network becomes too big, the network was supposed to disintegrate and then regroup, and replicate its structure to a higher level and create a 'network of networks'. Whereas some of these dynamics were literally on display for those around in the 'emerging' 1990s, these days the foundational network principles sound idealistic and magnificent, yet unreachable as never before: decentralization, distribution, federation. Historically speaking, the trouble started right at the height of its influence. When the internet population started to grow exponentially in the late 1990s/early 2000s, diversification reached a critical point. Users started to flock to the same websites. Conceptually speaking, the beginning of Web 2.0 started off with 'scale-free networks' that exhibit a power-law degree of distribution. This term was a paradigmatic shift, indicating the end of the old school idea that networks simply had an upper limit after which they would fall apart and almost naturally create new nodes.[\[15\]](#) The step from scale-free networks to the platform concept was a small one but it took almost a decade, until 2010, when Tarleton Gillespie formulated first rules of what was going to become the internet platform economy.

Mathematics-based 'network science' has had its day and remains silent over 'the law of scale-free bullshit'. Engineers who built it all remain silent and claim innocence. At least 8Chan founder Fredrick Brenner expresses second thoughts: "There's this idea that if we have unbridled freedom of speech that the best ideas will fall out. But I don't really think that's true anymore. I mean, I've looked at 8chan and I've been its admin, and what happens is the most rage-inducing memes are what wins out."[\[16\]](#) In a variation of Eugene Thacker, we could say that the pinnacle of humanity lies in its ability to disgust the other.

There is a similar case with actor-network theory, which simply could not compute the ugly side of social media platforms. This was all not supposed to happen and the political economy blind-spot of the 'mapping without a cause' Latour school became blatantly evident. At some point, from the late 1990s onwards, academics and theorists were no longer capable of keeping up with Silicon Valley's hypergrowth strategy and its venture capitalists that quietly financed the move from neo-liberal 'markets' to the creation of

monopolies by 'breaking things'. Wisdom for the few told us that competition is for losers. The once remarkable insight that bots are also actors no longer mattered.

Amsterdam-based student activist and theorist Sepp Eckenhausen stresses the role of the network as a business model. "Networks generate data and data equals money. Needless to say, these are not ordinary users. In this model surplus-value is constantly taken out of the network. This is known to be the case with social media but also happens in self-organized solidarity networks. These mechanisms seem to work best where the isolation of precarious subject is worse, but also felt most, such as in the art scene. The longing for community makes us easy prey. The willingness to share freely and build up sincere connections can easily lead to an 'enclosure of the commons'. Like at how academics ran into the business trap of academia.edu, after they had uploaded all their work, in full confidence that they were sharing it amongst their own network and that it would not be exploited."[\[17\]](#)

Data activist and researcher Niels ten Oever, who works with Stefania Milan in the Dactive project, emphasizes the invisible aspect: "Networks provide orderings to our lives, societies, machines, and cities. When networks make themselves known, they become visible in an almost burlesque manner: we want to see them, we know they are there, and yet they always remain at least partially covered. They evade total capture. Whatever we build on top of networks to make them seem interconnected, centralized, and uniform. Underlying networks show themselves at time of change, rupture, and crisis." For Niels networks still exist and thrive best underground: "The network is a complex assemblage, a multiplicity, that has raw and fuzzy edges, and never really works as expected. It can never be completely seen or understood. After wreaking havoc on the world, the networks cede back to where they belong: underground. Movements that are built on top of networks can have two fates: either they dissipate back into the distributed nature of the network (where they still travel!) or they centralize and get shed by the network itself, where they flow to the logic of institutionalization. Our plans should be big, but our expectations should be low. There is nothing wrong with being underground."[\[18\]](#)

Long-time Euro-American cultural critic Brian Holmes has this to say: "Here's the thing about the contemporary communications network: each of its human nodes is a socialized individual emerging from deep collective

time, whether centuries or millennia. Network theorist Manuel Castells was spectacularly wrong: the Net and the Self are not ontologically opposed, but instead, they're continually intertwined at all levels. This means that if you want a network to successfully self-organize, its members have to develop both an explicit ethics and a shared cultural horizon, as to overcome the inherited frameworks of belief and behaviour. Anarchists already knew this in practice, since their communities typically involve some kind of overarching philosophical dimension, as well as carefully articulated codes for daily collective life. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, Islamist radicals knew it too: they called on ancient religious beliefs and updated sharia laws to knit their networks together. That's why such groups could successfully take the lead during the early rounds of networked politics, beginning in 1999 and 2001 respectively. Meanwhile, media theorists including myself were projecting the idea that as long as you built it with free software, the computer-linked media system represented a clean break with the past: a sudden liberation from the manipulated corporate channels that had blocked spontaneous self-organization for so long. And here's the other thing: it just wasn't true."

Brian Holmes believes we still live in networked societies. "I still spend a lot of time working on technological platforms for self-organizing nets, such as the map/geoblog I'm currently making for the Anthropocene River network. What's clear, however, is that networked cultures aren't born from technological inventions such as the microprocessor or TCP/IP. Instead, they are made, by individuals working collectively to transform, not just their technological tools, but also their cultural horizons, and above all their day-to-day codes of ethical conduct. How to accomplish such profound cultural and philosophical work while still attending to the complex technologies on which most everyday social interactions now depend? That's where the political question is coalescing right now."[\[19\]](#)

Migrant-to-Migrant (M2M) activist Jo van der Spek (Amsterdam) has been involved from day one in the local We Are Here movement, working together with illegalized migrants. He suggests we look at criminal, migrant and family networks, the dark web and other social forms of internet culture "as they explicitly oppose the pleasures and pains of platforms. Possibly they are characterized by their preserving analog features that make them immune from algorithms and corporate data sharks."[\[20\]](#)

Precarity theorist Alex Foti from Milan believes that "the distinction

technical/social network has now blurred as the political and ethical aspects of algorithmic technology have come to the fore.” He urges us to do our own platform parties and organizations, because “isolated individuals on social media are less powerful than party cabals that resort to bot armies and constant media manipulation. Online platforms are the only way to grow fast in membership and power. Federalism is at the heart of the European project, but that doesn’t equate with horizontalism. We need to have a federal republic of Europe, federated hackers of the Union, federated collectives of xenofeminists etc. It’s time for effectiveness over righteousness. Anti-systemic forces need intellectual debate but also a shared line, and especially disciplined local cadres ready to fight for the planet against fossil capitalism. This means developing a green anti-capitalist ideology that gives meaning to the struggles of people and an organization that embodies it and implements it, especially if civil wars break out after ecological catastrophe.”[\[21\]](#)

What emerges out of the patchwork of experiences of the past decades is a new notion of network-driven techno-voluntarism. Forget automated processes, updates without a choice. The strength of a network is not to inform their participants. Information does not lead to action. This takes us back to the core question of organization of like-minded souls that come together to take action. This already assumes so much that needs to be taken apart. How do such ‘cells’ come into being? Can we overcome paranoia and a lack of trust of strangers and start to act with the Other in ways that blow up all possible filter bubbles in order to establish cosmopolitan platforms that facilitate local networks in working together on, yes, peer-to-peer production of common care? We know how to exchange information, how to communicate, we now need to utilize both in cause-based contexts. We don’t need no updates.

Sandeep Mertia from Delhi brings in another position, from the global south: “Theory can benefit from looking at the vast majority of the world that is only now beginning to get proper access to digital media. The infrastructures of data and capital in this space are owned and managed by both the state and privately-owned platforms. In India, there is a broad sense of having a certain ‘late-comer advantage’, bypassing earlier models of digital literacy and capacity-building towards more accessible forms of vernacular, visual and smartphone-centred digital media. It would be fatal to assume that hundreds of millions of new users will simply align with presently dominant practices of media consumption and circulation. Perhaps

an anthropology of what is emergent might offer new ways to inquire and theorize networks beyond taxonomic models of control and decentralization.”

The networks Mertia refers to are inside the platform logic. “Both the state’s Aadhaar from one side and quasi-monopolistic Reliance Jio on the other are operating as platforms at large.” According to Mertia there are many everyday practices of use and circulation that defy or work-around platformed logics. “Making WhatsApp networks for local tiffin delivery, for e.g., can said to be a part of the platform logic but they challenge formal food-delivery apps such as Zomato and Uber Eats. These users may not aspire for decentralisation per se—most likely not—but they challenge centralisation in ways that can be useful in rethinking networks.”[\[22\]](#)

The European counter meme collective Clusterduck comes up with a list of tactics in defence of networks. “Our digital communities constantly undergo forms of intrusion, pollution, appropriation. Networks are not dead and yet they are buried. The right to network is not granted and must be claimed through practices of analysis, hijacking and re-appropriation. From the BBS frontiers to Web 2.0, the human capacity for cooperation has constantly evolved, defying easy definitions.”

Surviving as a network today requires an increasingly complex toolkit of practices: creating a movement based on a Twitter hashtag to convey a sense of a constant URL activity; hijacking the YouTube RetroPlayer-algorithm to make sure that right-wing commentators’ videos are followed by debunking videos capable of bringing radicalized users out of the so-called “alt-right funnel”; organizing moments where the networks can meet IRL to coordinate, celebrate and strengthen the ties between users; founding and administrating thematic groups on mainstream social platforms such as Facebook and Reddit, to lure users and communities away from there and redirect them to fringe social platforms such as Mastodon, Discord or Telegram; analysing the history of web communities and subcultures, to learn their networking techniques and proceed backwards, in order to understand the processes of hostile appropriation, co-optation and hijacking they had to endure; breaking the cycles of hatred, triggered by bots and sponsored trolls, through white hat trolling and debunking activities, to turn the quarrel and noise of ‘reverse censorship’ into something meaningful; using ‘top of the pop’ design and codes to carry our messages, and create memes and memetic narratives that can propagate through filter bubbles, in

order to bring together communities that would never meet otherwise; exploring new narratives, highlighting the importance of interspecies cooperation and the significance of symbiotic and parasitic relationships in shaping our capacity to co-evolve. 'None of us is stronger than all of us' has never been so alive."[\[23\]](#)

All this leaves me with the question of how I look (back) at networks. Am I ready to salvage the name of my research institute to make a statement? Is this a requiem for the network without consequences, a sing-along-song that sticks with you for a while and then gets forgotten? Should I let go or do I have some emotional attachment to the term? If the concept no longer works, then drop it. It is true that over the past decade our Institute of Network Cultures did not start 'a platform' (maybe we should have?). Indeed, what I have done to try to strengthen the concept from within in order to overcome the indecisive nature of networks. Since 2005 I worked together with Ned Rossiter on the idea of 'organized networks'. In 2018 our book *Organization after Social Media* came out in which we brought together our writings.[\[24\]](#) Our proposal was to overcome 'weak links', leave behind the diffuse networks and work with much smaller, dedicated online groups that are based on 'strong links'. What we deliberately did not address was how to scale up with networks. These days we want to go from zero to hero in a day... Against the proclaimed ease in which we're reaching critical mass in no time, we put forward the idea of an avant-garde, cell or think-tank that sticks to the issue. The shift here is one towards organization that needs certain tools in order to get things done.

Organized networks invent new institutional forms whose dynamics, properties and practices are internal to the operational logic of communication media and digital technologies. Their emergence is prompted, in part, by wider social fatigue with and increasing distrust of institutions such as the church, political party, firm and labour union, which maintain hierarchical modes of organization. While not without hierarchical tendencies (founders, technical architectures, centralized infrastructures, personality cults), organized networks tend to gravitate more strongly toward horizontal modes of communication, practice and planning. Organized networks emerge at a time of intense crisis (social, economic, environmental), when dominant institutions fail in their core task: decision-making. As experiments in collective practice conjoined with digital communication technologies, organized networks are testbeds for networked forms of governance that strives to address a world rapidly spiralling into a

planetary abyss.

Is the platform the necessary next step of History or rather an anomaly? If tech ubiquity will be a given for the foreseeable future, how should we read 1990s network nostalgia? Is a renaissance of decentralized infrastructure, actively owned and defended by communities, a viable option? What happens when we decide to put in a massive effort to dismantle ‘free’ platforms, including their culture of sub-conscious comfort, and spread actual tools—including the knowledge of how to use and maintain them? Tech has become a vital part of our social life and should not be outsourced. This can only be done when priority is given to ‘digital literacy’ (which, in fact, has gone down the drain over the past decade). Society pays a high price for ease of smartphones. Soon, few will be able to afford the built-in vagueness of the network logic. Coordination is required, and debates with consequences. What social media have grossly neglected is democratic decision-making software for how to get there (which further development is based on actual experiences). Roaming around aimlessly, in rhizomatic circles, will soon be an activity few will find exciting. The ultimate critique of social media will be that there are boring. We’re not there yet but the call of the exodus gets louder. There will be more urgent and exciting things to be done. Which tools bring us closer to the bliss of action?

Networks are not destined to remain inward-looking auto-poetic mechanisms. Once situations are on the move we can no longer distinguish network from event. What was there first, the network or the event? Such a question should no longer bother us. This something for data analysts aka historians to figure out. But we’ve moved on. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing asks: “How does a gathering become a ‘happening’, that is greater than a sum of its parts? One answer is contamination, make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge.”^[25]

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[1] Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, Verso, London, 2015, p. 64.

[2] Romain Dillet, *The Year Social Networks Were No Longer Social—In Praise of Private Communities*, <https://techcrunch.com/2018/12/23/the-year-social-networks-were-no-longer-social/>.

- [3] Email exchange with Nadine Roestenburg, July 25, 2019.
- [4] Email exchange with Jenny Odell, August 7, 2019.
- [5] Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, p. 191.
- [6] See Oliver Marchert, *Neu Beginnen*, Verlag Turia + Kant, Wien, 2005, p. 18-19.
- [7] “Collapsology is the study of the collapse of industrial civilization and what could succeed it.” The concept was developed by Pablo Servigne and Raphaël Stevens in their essay Comment tout tout collombrer: Collapsologie (2015). <https://www.archeos.eu/collapsologie/>. See also www.collapsologie.fr that “keeps track of the scientific literature on ecological collapse, limits to growth and existential risks.”
- [8] Email exchange with Tiziana Terranova, August 8, 2019.
- [9] Raimund Minichbauer, *Facebook entkommen*, Transversal Texts, Wien, 2018, p. 101-103.
- [10] <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634>.
- [11] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/11/good-old-days-look-deeper-and-myths-of-ideal-communities-fades>.
- [12] <https://www.oftwominds.com/blogfeb19/evolution-wins2-19.html>.
- [13] I have described the re-arrangement between the key terms media, network, platform and stack in a chapter of my 2019 book *Sad by Design* (Pluto Press, London, 2019).
- [14] Soshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Profile Books, London, 2019, p. 346.
- [15] See also danah boyd’s recollection of how her term ‘context collapse’ emerged in the early Web 2.0 period:
<http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2013/12/08/coining-context-colla>

[pse.html](#).

[16] <https://members.tortoisemedia.com/2019/06/29/8chan/content.html> See also the work of Alberto Brandolini, originator of the bullshit asymmetry principle; Brandolini's law emphasizes the difficulty of debunking bullshit and, development of the 'intellectual denial of service' concept and 'bad infinitum,' "a tendency for non-experts to overwhelm experts with repetitive costly, and often unproductive demands for evidence or counter-argument to oft-debunked or misleading claims." (<https://techiavellian.com/intellectual-denial-of-service-attacks>).

[17] See <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/column/end-academiaedu-how-business-takes-over>.

[18] Email exchange with Niels ten Oever, August 5, 2019.

[19] Email exchange with Brian Holmes, August 7, 2019.

[20] Email exchange with Jo van der Spek, August 10, 2019.

[21] Email exchange with Alex Foti, August 28, 2019.

[22] Email exchange with Sandeep Mertia, August 9, 2019.

[23] Statement of the Clusterduck collective, August 17, 2019.

[24] Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, *Organization after Social Media*, Minor Compositions, Colchester, 2018.

[25] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Princeton University Press, Oxford, 2017, p. 27.