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The internet is not a cultural «melting pot»

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Publication date
2018

Document Version
Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Lovink, G. (Author). (2018). The internet is not a cultural «melting pot». Web publication/site, Internetbeyond.net. <http://internetbeyond.net/blog/lovink#!/tab/55479821-2>

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Интернет — не плавильный котел культур

Гирт Ловинк

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The internet is not a cultural «melting pot».

Anglo-American globalization has been challenged for decades. The liberal consensus says that [There Is No Alternative](#) (for instance, to austerity) and that there is an «international community» and a related «civil society» that has values, rights and issues. All this is eroding, questioned by national populism. The decline of the West is not happening at the speed of light. It is a slow implosion (comparable to the decline of the Roman empire). What we also see is the rise of a so-called «poly-centred» world, an ideology that elites from Russia and China are keen to promote. Beyond good and evil, there's something to it. So far, this crisis of the One World has not been extended to the world of «flows» (as Manuel Castells called it), the goods and services and their related underlying tech standards.

The world may be plural in a cultural and political sense, but in terms of the global technological infrastructure will have to speak in one language, otherwise the networks will fall apart and we will go back to the early 90s when a range of network protocols existed in parallel, unable to exchange data (AOL, internet, CompuServe, bulletin board systems). It's not so hard to imagine that HTML and even TCP/IP will fall apart in national or regional protocols, in particular if you take the role of the internet in cyberwarfare into account. We cannot be naive about [«running code»](#) and [«consensus»](#) in a time of global conflict. The Western «civil society» internet community likes to avoid these topics but if you're following developments in China, you get a different overall picture.

Most of us are still living in a era of infra-hallucination. We're not duped or fooled. That's not the issue. We've simply forgotten how vulnerable global communication is, and how deep the (Western) ideology of globalization is tied to the global infrastructure. Kill the one, you kill the other. In most parts of the «Global South» the fragile nature of internet-based services is well known, with daily electricity cuts and unstable mobile networks. ISIS was an interesting case. They were deeply Western in the sense that they relied on global communication channels and used them for agit-prop purposes.

Right now, we only take hacking and cryptography into consideration as tools for secrecy and warfare. But what

happens when we dismantle the key nodes of the global network themselves and, in a next step, create networks that fundamentally do not speak to each other? The military origins of the internet are known to all, we do not have to go through that time and again. Google and Facebook, with their data centres and cables, are an integral part of the US military. Amazon is not an integral part of the Russian military. Alibaba is part of the Chinese military. I hope I'm offending anyone saying this.

How will a post-internet insurgence look like? Or, even more relevant, what will happen when world powers such as Russia and China will not just leave the «petrol dollar» but exit the technical internet consensus, once they draw necessary conclusion from the fact that the West can sabotage their entire infrastructure, economy, communications and military remotely (and visa versa, of course)?

If we read the populist imaginary, there is a growing desire to withdraw into urban communities with regional ties. Combine this with the ecological necessity to produce more locally, the necessity to dismantle the carbon-heavy global trade and the backlash against migration and you get a glimpse of things to come. AI systems will make us less dependent of English as global language. Machines will translate our communication (they already do this). Please note that you and me are currently communicating in English. I only switched to that language around 1994. For my generation there was a rich age of cultural life and exchanges before global English. We were arguably the last. Soon we will see the arrival of the post-English generation. The madness of «global benchmarks» will dissipate, from English peer-review journalists as the default standards what «science» is, to the corrupt practices of the global consultancy firms that still certify numerous global flows. The power of post-war Western bodies such as IMF and Worldbank have already been minimised, comparable to the 1980s when they dictated economic policies, notably in Latin-America. Across the globe people are waking up and are able to read the white-geek-colonial-male values in the presumably neutral procedures and standards. «Your global governance is not ours».

What forms of the «techno-social» will arise from the rubble of Silicon Valley? It would be good to speculate about this, for instance through contemporary forms of «science fiction». This may already happen, just that I am not aware of this. The fear we need to address here is closed-off provincialism, infighting and self-destructive implosions inside the Next Monade. Which parts of global culture do we really cherish and do not want to lose, at any cost? It is probably not the cheap ideology of multi-culturalism, which never went further than a culture of tolerance. Our cultures shy away from radical hybrids, deep engagements and the clashes that come with ongoing, intense, intimate contact with the Other.

The internet is not a cultural «melting pot». Instead, we ended up with software regimes that install filter bubbles as default. Networks have become cages, filled with audiences that need to be served with smooth messages that do not upset your users. Differences and conflicts are seen as values that have to be filtered out, prevented, and ultimately violently punished, at all cost. If you disagree with me, you're a troll, and I will make sure that you will be banned. That's the cultural logic of the internet, and resulting «expulsions» of the Other are actively promoted by the Silicon Valley engineering class. Instead, I am an advocate to «work through the issues, together».

In my view the «community» value should be lived in a task-oriented effort aimed at getting things done. Current social media architectures lack such features as they are based on principles such as updating, liking, news, sharing and less so on common activities.

It is now 25 years ago that public access to the internet in Europe was introduced. Add at least 10-15 years to that for West-European academia. That's a long time. There are no excuses. Both in terms of traditional IT-industry, libertarian start-ups, alternative net culture and critical reflection, not much has happened. Europe is a periphery of the American market. This is a harsh judgement but one that needs to be made before we move on and look at possible ways out. What we have are Nordic «best practices» such as Skype and Spotify. The Netherlands is known for TomTom and Blender. Whereas European visual arts, theatre, literature and cinema all have their own canon, including theory and criticism, this cannot be said of internet culture. Please name one wellknown European internet critic. Evgeny Morozov, yes, he was born in the USSR! For European culture, internet does not exist. You cannot study it.

Lately, the EU is getting known for its passive-aggressive General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). But is that something to be proud of? Hardly. To me this is a late victory of lawyers and Brussels bureaucrats that remain unaccountable for the billions of Euros they invested in expensive EU IT projects that had zero results. In response to their own failure they want to regulate others. Their failure goes back to their obsession with

abstract labels. The Chinese immediately copy-paste Silicon Valley concepts and then let it grow quickly (put in the hands of a specific startup). After a period of growth they give the service the freedom to adopt to specific wishes and requirements of the target audience. Brussels, on the other hand, has refused to directly compete with Silicon Valley. Instead, they make up empty generic terms for their programs that no-one understands and then invite traditional players to set up consortia together with academia that also wonders about the aim of chosen generic concepts. The quasi-academic context is neither good for the hard IT side, nor for speculative theory or internet criticism.

Moving away from the current European misery called the «great regression», we have to remain strategic and ask what's to be done. Beyond Brexit and Trump, Europe will have to define its own destiny--and it will. What provides hope are the strong ties between progressive cities such as Barcelona, Naples, Berlin and Amsterdam (to name some) that attempt to uphold the onslaught of national populism and the still strong neo-liberal globalism of the European ruling elites. Internet alternatives will only have a chance if they have a strong grassroots base and support self-organization. The local is strong, yes. This is where chances are most visible, where urban culture and «the public stack» (also called data commons) intertwine. This requires a Gramscian approach, to make alliances with hipsters and migrants, expats and refugees, in short, the «entreprenariat» (as Silvio Larusso coined it). We need to show everyone that we have a strong common political program, independent channels to organize and a Will to Hegemony, deeply rooted in the everyday culture of the city. One that can beat resentment and build practical commons.