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Q & A on alternative social networking services

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Q & A with Geert Lovink

By Jessica Koerts, Jasper van Huizen, Hugo Blacquièrre, Daniil Naumetc and Youngmu Chang.

We are an international group of students studying “Information & Innovation” at the Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen. This course is part of the study program “Information Services and Management”. Now we are working on a project on alternative social networking services. We will present the results of our workshop in a workshop at the BOBCATSSS conference in January 2016 in Lyon. During our research, we have we read your book *Networks Without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media* (2012).

Q: Why are you critical of the regular social network sites (SNS)?

A: Because I am part of a generation that fought for decentralized networks, an open internet in which the user wasn't just a consumer of some product. Developments of the past ten or so years have meant that regular social media users have traded a lot of the earlier complexities and freedom against simplicity and speed.

Q: What kind of added value do you see in alternative SNS?

A: The ones that have been around for the last 5 years should be looked at as utopian sketches. They were prototypes that struggled with the idea how to bring into being ‘decentralized networks’ in a period that is dominated by datacenters, large players and surveillance policies that all stand for an unprecedented centralization. In a way we are back in 1993; but this time the internet itself has taken the place of the centralized service Compuserve. BTW. I clearly reject the idea of ‘added value’. Artists, activists and programmers all work together to build up their own networks, spaces, initiatives. This is done with the aim to change society, to create (self-)employment, not give some CEOs good ideas how to further maximize their profits. Of course, there is something like the inevitable ‘appropriation’ mechanism. This was much discussed in the 1970s and 80s. These days the sell-out happens less and less on a personal level. We do not hear that A or B has betrayed ‘the movement’ and started to work for the other side—unless we talk about working for the NSA. Indeed, for some there is a moral dilemma whether they should work for Google... What worries me more is the (conceptual) stagnation of Linux and many of the free software

initiatives. With the exception of Ubuntu, I don't see much happening. Another positive sign could be the growing interest in crypto-software and secure browser Tor.

Q: What can regular SNS learn from the alternatives?

A: With alternative I suppose you refer to initiatives such as Lorea, Diaspora, Friendica, Crabgrass and others that our Unlike Us has been discussing. Hopefully, the social media monopolies cannot learn a thing from them. It is not the idea of alternatives to reform or reign in capitalist Silicon Valley firms. It is my dream that Facebook will close shop as soon as possible, preferably because its users massively walk away and abandon the service. I am saying this because such sudden exoduses have happened in the past. Just think of MySpace, Hyves, Bebo, StudiVZ etc. A couple of years ago I was still hopeful this was going to happen. It is still not 100% impossible that it could happen. We all know that the internet environment is very liquid. It can become 100% uncool to use Facebook, almost overnight. We all know that Facebook is in fact already stagnating in Western markets. Young kids no longer use it in the same extend as they are bored with the parental control, which did not exist 5-10 years ago. However, there is also something like Facebook the corporation... They've now had enough time to anticipate such obvious shifts. This is why they a. constantly tweak the service and change the terms and conditions, the newsfeed algorithm etc. and b. buy up companies such as Whatsapp and Instagram. The current popularity of the Messenger app, for instance, could be read as a sign that the 'old' Facebook activities such as updating the profile, might get out of date.

Q: Do you think that the alternative SNS can contribute to a better social media landscape?

A: Perhaps. Personally, I do not think in those terms. Alternatives do not 'contribute' to anything. They do not improve or upgrade or whatever. Alternatives question existing premises. They bring paradigmatic change. If designed well, they represent a fundamentally different approach. For instance, they could oppose the neo-liberal logic of what we call 'platform capitalism' and its aim to suck as much private data out of the users in order to sell them to the highest bidder, including the NSA and allied secret services. Peer-to-peer alternatives criticize the underlying business models and political motives of companies such as Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple, or 'the stacks' as Bruce Sterling coined them. The aim is to question the social media consensus and the mesmerizing routines that people are in

these days. Just enter any cafe, public transportation, street or airport and you will see the massive addition of people. People who enter an elevator will take out their smart phones and check it. It's what I call the techno-subconscious.

Q: What are the possibilities to keep existing SNS and alternatives having a relationship?

A: There is no relationship, for the simple fact that there are no working counter platforms. Alternatives are neither copies nor versions or upgrades but technological projects with radically different values and architectures. They are about collaborations, not about updates of whatever 'friends' have been up to. They are networks with a cause. We no longer live in 2007—and it is not 2011 either. However we all know that the tiny experiments that occurred so far have all failed. They did not scale, as they say... My suggestion is not only to further develop the 'social' that we prefer but also investigate the failures we've so far made. We need to study carefully why free software did not make it to the mainstream internet users (apart from some corporate usages and a relatively small geek communities). The next challenge would be to draw conclusions from the long-term Wikipedia stagnation that is now becoming more well known in circles outside of the Wikimedia Foundation. In line of 'Gamergate' we could say that the internet still has its feminist and post-colonial phase ahead of it. Cultural sensitivity in the engineering circles is not very well developed, let's put it that way... This is ultimately also the case when they have to answer the question what the 'social' in social media is all about.

Q: What future do you see for alternative SNS?

A: We'll first have to survive the current downturn. The good thing about these developments is that a possible turn might be around the corner. Who knows... Maybe the next revolution will be technical? Our problem right now is the stagnating 'democratization' of technological skills. Since 2000, with the rise of Web 2.0, a deskilling of internet-related programming has unfolded. Right now, we're confronted with the dreadful consequences of the 'user friendly' interfaces and primitive social media architectures. Our lives and identities, our histories, our knowledge, all of it gets more complex—except for social media. Let's reverse this trend. This is a more productive approach than the moralistic appeals to leave Facebook, which, in the end, turn the politics of social media issue into a personal one.