

Speed Dialogue about Networks, Borders and Commitment

Email Exchange between Eugenio Tisselli and Geert Lovink
About Networks, Borders and Commitment
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ET: In your text “Ten Theses on Non-Democratic Electronics” you mention that the borders of a network comprise of “non-democratic” elements of democracy. What exactly do you mean by “borders”? Are there different types of borders, and if so, would you make special distinctions between them?

GL: Networks grow erratic and in most cases have no formal membership. It is hard for those inside a network to have an overview of who is in and who’s out, even though this knowledge is not necessarily secret. Networks thrive when they have an active informal scene in which an ever increasing amount of members have ever increasing ‘weak ties’. We should not reduce networks to the intimate ties between a select group of old boys. They of course exist but what people these days are interested in is extending their connections in terms of their ‘potential’. Online network should not be judged for their actual social value because the play with their potentiality is a key part. We are almost talk about non-existing networks. That’s the real border, going into pure potentiality. The core of the network is where we find its founders and the most active members, the moderators and dissidents. The further you move to the margins, to the ‘borders’ of the networks, ‘where no man has gone before’, the more we find ourselves on the fringe. Should we identify us with the edge of networks? For me this is still an open question. It is tempting to presume that the it is all happening at the far ends of the social, where things meet and mix. But why are we so drawn to this idea that there is a hybrid situation out there? The network may as well end there. The ‘organized networks’ concept that Ned Rossiter and I are tinkering with presumes that we should focus our attention to the dense core as many classic ‘border’ qualities such as vagueness and delay can also be found in the presumed power centre.

ET: Do you think that network borders can be seen as an absolute boundary needed by the system to maintain and differentiate itself or are they some sort of flexible membranes that can be adjusted to different situations? Is it possible to say that there are different types of borders for each individual that comprises a network, or are they the same for all?

GL: We have decades of system theory and network theory, and many years of experiences within computer networks. I speak from the latter. I also speak from experiences of activists, hackers, artists and other cultural workers who mix the real and the virtual. For the white male from the West borders are simply frontiers: they challenge us. But for most world citizens borders are all too real, and there are way too many of them. They can be social and political, linguistic, security-wise (passwords). Borders of networks on the other hand are less clear. They tend to be invisible and based on soft power principles.

ET: When an individual wishes to become part of a network, he/she must cross its border. What rights / obligations does the individual acquire with these transition? Why should a network seek to transform and renew itself through its boundaries, as you suggest in your text? Maybe part of the strength in digital networks lies precisely in the fact that they are ephemeral, what do you think?

GL: If you want to enter a network, you will have to be invited, ephemeral or not. Look at MySpace,

Orkut, LinkedIn. Someone else will help you to cross the border. It is not so much an individual who is making a transition. The space around you is entirely social. Unless you are one of the rare persons who starts of a network. In that case you are the one who invites others. You are right about the loose, informal aspect of networks. But you would be the first to reinterpret this as a virtue! We're now discussing how useful it is, for instance, to use MySpace as a tool for activist mobilization. Obviously such social network sites have a great potential as one can link small groups of 'friends' quickly with one another. However, this only seems to work in a homogeneous environment where youngsters actually meet each other anyway. So the issue and the locality are already a given. What MySpace does, in fact, is to turn the mobilization into a cool event. In the past people would have called each other, now they send text messages, notify their 'friends' or use email lists. This is all a fluid affair as there are no sustainable structures that we can draw upon next time because who knows if the kids will be hooked on MySpace in a couple of months.

ET: When you say that true potentiality is the real border, you are talking about people who use networks to create relations that "could be useful for a future time", but that are actually forever postponed. Is that correct? Something like giving away your personal cards to all the people you meet at a "networking party"... it's quite likely that you won't get any calls. But then, is the potentiality found at the edges of digital networks any different from being at the edge of a "physical" social system?

GL: Not at all, at some point Adilkno, the group of free-floating intellectuals that I am part of, called this state of despair 'electronic solitude'. Surrounded by users, family and colleagues, all with similar interests, tastes and opinions, people find that their 'friends' do not really care. They live their own lives. What we indulge in is sheer potentiality. I could date all these thousands, debate the war in Iraq with them, chat on Skype or meet them in Second Life. As you say that's all fantasy. It is a necessary illusion that comes with the 'wealth of networks' (Benkler) which, as we know, is not aimed at redistribution of wealth through markets, nor at some automatic extension of freedom.

ET: For me, borders are tangible. That's why I find the act of crossing significant, even defining. Maybe it's because of my Mexican origins, and the problems that I had to confront crossing different national boundaries. That's why I am aware of the space of negotiations that one enters when crossing a border. In contrast, I have noticed that some of my European friends cross all types of borders, even in the daily lives, without even noticing... while at the same time they tend to keep an almost impassable barrier to protect their intimacy. That's why I am seeking to characterize an individual's status regarding rights and obligations when he/she crosses a border. Not because I'm Mexican, of course, but because I think that establishing more explicit "legal" or "illegal" (doable-not doable) situations for individuals could be of use within networks.

GL: Maybe we should not get into fight over the definition of what is and what's not a border. I guess if one doesn't even notice that he or she is crossing a border, it's not really a border anymore. It could be a historical relict, an irrelevant symbolic line that was crossed or some physical/sexual endurance that was telecasted. In my opinion a border experience is a real one—and can only be real. Maybe this is why we activists have to erect no border camps (<http://www.noborder.org/>). to make these borders visible again for us privileged Westerners.

ET: I have also gone through your text "Dawn of the Organized Networks" that you wrote in collaboration with Ned Rossiter. I am interested in the parallel that you draw with organized crime. Within organized crime you can also find the concepts of border, rights and obligation acting very strongly, even in extreme ways. While I'm in no way advocating for hard, or repressive politics, I do

think that the obligations of an individual within a network should be made more clear. Of course, engagement can't be enforced but, on the other hand, collaboration can be monitored.

GL: Of course many of us shy away from calls for more rules and regulation. But this is a sentiment that not all of us share. As you there are calls amongst progressive thinkers and activists to stop with all the freedom and chaos and reign in protest culture into an orderly business. Read for instance Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter's *The Rebel Sell*. In the conclusion of their book they write: "What our society needs is more rules, not less." I share their critique of culture jamming that is not going bring us the revolution. It is true that we have very little means these days to focus and steer revolutionary energies. Revolt these days almost always means violence and chaos. If you see how complex Western societies function, revolutions will almost necessarily result in major disruptions of ordinary supplies, services and networks. This is the image of the primordial chaos that most US-American citizens have literary armed themselves against. If human beings are used to routine and not change, then the chance of them responding positively to disruptive, revolutionary situations seems to drop in our techno-global age. We have to take these debates about more rules and regulations serious: can activists really take up the role of some civil police force? Is this really our task? I am skeptical here. Personally, I would much rather see activists as the messengers of freedom who teach the 'sculpturing of the self' as a positive way to deal with responsibility and restraint, rather than imposed rules. This is perhaps also what we try to in critical Internet culture: shaping collective ways of conflict resolution while stimulation debate and (real) difference at the same time.

ET: Finally, I do think that ephemerality (not looseness) can be a virtue in some specific cases. I see digital networks, especially in developing countries, as possible triggers for extra-digital action. Even as pedagogical tools, where people learn how to deal with relational and informational spaces, and take those skills to the streets, which is where most of the political decisions in such countries are still made. When people arrive at that point, the digital network becomes a mere training ground.

GL: I am more cautious here. Computers and digital networks always create self-referential dimensions and never be looked down about as tools, no matter how much we would like to tame them and instrumentalize them for good causes. The more we know about their technical architectures and social dynamics these networks can unleash, the better we can integrate them. The slogan of the 1989 Romanian television was "The Media is with us." We can update this slogan by saying: "The Internet is with us." Look at it as a data cloud that we carry with us, a friendly ghost that accompanies us.

ET: I believe that your arguments point towards education. Not the kind enforced on individuals by high institutions, but a "day-to-day" education: a reappropriation of politics, so that each member of a collective can actively decide upon things and learn from his/her peers. Your view of the activist as a teacher is inspiring, and it suggests a scenario made up of networks. In my research I also try to examine closely how this networked education can happen, and analyze the ways in which it is already happening.

Of course there are good examples of digital groups of activists engaged in the exchange of information but currently I am interested in people that don't explicitly consider themselves activists. Yet, they also generate positive change. I believe that this is the case of canal*MOTOBOY in Sao Paulo, Brazil (<http://www.zexe.net/SAOPAULO>), where motorcycle messengers armed with multimedia mobile phones broadcast their daily experiences to a web page. They point at problems, they denounce social issues in their locality, and they give their opinions (and interview others) on how life could be better in their chaotic city. They aim at the potential of expanding our understanding of their problems, while indirectly affecting our own views on urban issues, no matter if we don't live in Sao Paulo. They also

want to learn from others, by opening themselves to feedback. So, my question is: how do you think that a communication process like this can inform and modify the motoboy's activities in daily life? To put it in a more general context, how can the dynamics of digital networks change our views and roles within society? Do you think that the change brought by digital networks is happening mainly at an intimate level, in which individuals learn to deal with things (including information) in a radically different way?

The metaphor you suggest (the data cloud as a "friendly ghost") is very rich: it implies that we won't want the ghost to ever go away, because it's friendly and helpful. And, as a ghost, it is neither vulnerable nor limited to the sort of things we humans are... but it is nevertheless fragile. Now that we are so attached to our dear creature, what would happen if it suddenly went away? Is this creature entirely "ours", or rather is it mostly "theirs"?

I am also concerned with software design. How can we create software that specifically fits the new social scenarios? Some of the software we are using now emerged from particular contexts and needs. The history of the Internet is a good example. It is also a radical case of appropriation and reorientation. Groups interested in social issues, such as activists, take advantage of open protocols and open software, but I believe that it is time to start thinking about more specific technologies.

What about software that could function on mobile devices, and that is meant to be a support for the intercommunication and mutual monitoring of physically disjoint groups that act together during demonstrations, such as the ones that are taking place right now in Germany? Or, going back to "informal" activists, what types of software can be created to enhance and expand their political sphere? I am trying to see beyond MySpace.

GL: It is early days for the friendly ghost. Our obsession with new media and technology, in part, comes from our excitement and fear, our unfamiliarity with it. We don't need to say that things change fast. We're probably the first or second generation that gets used to having this data cloud having around us. There is an obvious reference in the friendly ghost concept to the work of Walter Benjamin, but I hesitate to go for the full academic exegese. I see Benjamin as a strong reference and source of inspiration but do not like to violate his work with interpretation. I leave that up to others. We are the artwork now and have to reconcile with our techno aura that we carry around with us, both in a literary sense (when we carry a mobile phone with us) and metaphorically, when we speak of our data body inside the Big Brother databases.

What you suggest about mobile phone interconnectivity in a certain space in fact already exists: it's a feature on Bluetooth. Of course sex is the driver here. "Brits are engaging in 'toothing', where strangers on trains and buses and at bars and concerts hook up for clandestine sex by text messaging each other with their Bluetooth-enabled cell phones or PDAs." It would indeed be interesting to expand this to the level of ideas, moods and feelings about political topics, in order to commit 'senseless acts of beauty' as George McKay called them, but then in the social context. In this way you could create social mobs on the spot that do a hit and run action and then dissolve. Obviously data privacy will be an issue here, as otherwise cops will arrest everyone within hours after the micro revolt.

I find your interest in the non-activist activists valuable but we have to see these spheres and two autonomous spaces. Inspiring activists shy away from ordinary people as they do not like to see themselves as preachers. The battle over global hegemony happens elsewhere and should not depend on some one-to-one propaganda game. We're not in the business of saving souls. If we meet people we want to hang with them, and not convince them at some point in the conversation. We do not hide our

opinions but we're not aggressive either. Change comes in subtle and sudden ways. It is microscopic and endemic, and volcanic at times. I am inspired by the work of Toshiya Ueno in Japan, a cultural studies scholar and DJ who has been struggling with these gaps and ruptures between the world of the subcultural cool and the political left that in his country have no common ground at all. Toshiya struggles with his identities as a scholar, activist and ambient techno head.

If you want to study how depressing 'affluenza' is, head for Tokyo. Of course it is all semiotically overwhelming there and 'alien' if you are there for the first time, but the exoticism is matched by an even stronger mass conformism, a radical boredom and disengagement with the world that we find in few places. We say that's political too, moving away from the world, rejecting dead forms of political engagement and all that. I never saw Japanese as some soulless robot consumers. The luxurious outside is not hiding their existential lives. Many gaijin authors have dealt with these issues. Japan is interesting because life is so ultra modern, however the social and political seem to be so archaic. These realms are excluded from the constant drive towards innovation. Germans seem to be much better in combining aesthetics and politics, as do the British and the Italians, each in their own way. All these are but momentary sparks, utopian test runs. Perhaps we should not be overly ambitious and believe in our capacities to grow such memes into a larger storyline, a strong picture that millions can be inspired by.