

Geert Lovink

After the Social Media Hype: Dealing with Information Overload

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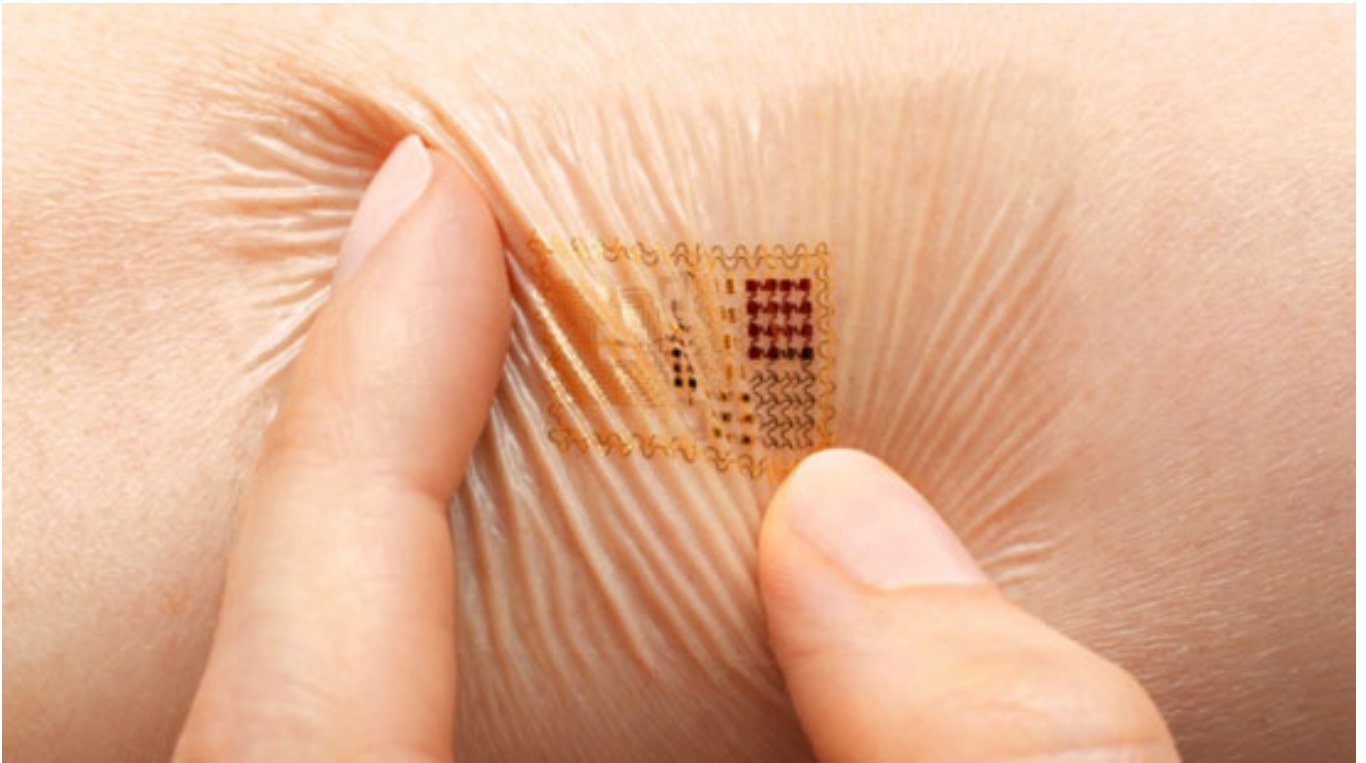
The “social media” debate is moving away from presumed side effects, such as loneliness (Sherry Turkle), stupidity (Andrew Keen), and brain alterations (Nicholas Carr), to the ethical design question of how to manage our busy lives. This Foucauldian turn in internet discourse sets in now that we have left behind the initial stages of hype, crash, and mass uptake. Can we live a beautiful life with a smart phone, or is our only option to switch it off and forget about it? Do we really have to be bothered with retweeting each other’s messages for the rest of our lives? When will the social fad that is Silicon Valley be over and done with? We are ready to move on. Time to send your last lolcats.

Mainstream internet discourse has turned sour. How long can we bear witness to the shadow boxing of useful idiots such as Steven Johnson, Clay Shirkey, and Jeff Jarvis, who ceaselessly battle Evgeny Morozov over whether memes have supremacy over the American liberal opinion space? Is social media the nail in the coffin of traditional gatekeepers? “Twitter is a vast confusion of vows, wishes, edicts, petitions, lawsuits, pleas, laws, complaints, grievances” (James Gleick). Who will guide us in our search for the rules, duties, and prohibitions of digital, networked communication? Where is the stoic calm in this sea of populist outrage?

The internet and smart phones are here to stay. They blend smoothly into our crisis-stricken neoliberal age, which is characterized by economic stagnation, populist anxieties, and media spectacles. The question no longer concerns the potential or the social impact of “new media,” but how to cope with them. In calling this “Foucauldian,” we do not refer to the Foucault of surveillance and punishment, but rather to the later Foucault, the one who wrote about the ethical care of the self. How do we practice the “art of living” with so much going on simultaneously? A few years ago, blog research already invoked Foucault’s genealogy of confession when analyzing Web 2.0’s user-generated content as a self-promotion machine. Recently, attention has shifted towards the aesthetics of mental and physical sanity. Can we speak of a “virtue of networking” that guides us in what to say and when to shut up, what to save and when to join, when to switch off and where to engage? How can everyone’s life become a work of art in this age of standardized commodities and services?

Most artistic, activist, and academic work portrays social media as a technology of domination. Whereas the Unlike Us network (in which I am deeply involved) is engaged in the struggle for internet privacy and the building of software alternatives to Facebook and Twitter, the authors I will discuss here explore the

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Prototype for flexible electronic circuits that stick directly to the skin like temporary tattoos and monitor the wearer's health.



Gherasim Luca, title and date unknown. Collage

possibility of altering our lifestyles.¹ The data streams may rain down on us, but we still have the freedom to decide how best to respond to this meteorological given. We can remain inside and focus on the shape of the umbrella, or we can take a walk outside and get wet. The sovereign attitude of ignoring the constant stimuli of our techno-saturated everyday lives is not available to everyone. Distraction is a useful holdover from our hunter-gatherer past, when it helped us focus on dangers that could approach from all sides. As such, it is inscribed deep in our human system. But could it also be a gift that helps focus on multiple tasks simultaneously?

The question on the table is – following Foucault – how to minimize domination and shape new technologies of the self. Why has the internet industry bred its own monsters of centralization and control (Google, Facebook, Amazon) while promising the opposite? What bothers us is our own survival. Which techniques are effective in reducing the social noise and permanent data floods that scream for attention? What kind of online platforms facilitate lasting forms of organization? We're not merely talking here about filters that delete spam and "kill" your ex. As the state of internet discourse shows, it is all about training and repetition (as Aristotle already emphasized). There is no ultimate solution. We will need to constantly train ourselves to focus, while remaining open to new currents that question the very foundations of our direction. This is not merely a question of distributing our concentration. When do we welcome the Other, and when should it be jammed? When do we stop searching and start making? There are times when our real-time communication weaponry should be fired up for mobilization and temporary spectre dominance, until the evening sets in and it is time to chill out and open other doors of perception. But when do these times ever arrive?

We know by now that publicly criticizing the Facebooks of the world is not enough. There is a hope that boredom will prevail amongst youngsters, with users moving on, forgetting current social media platforms altogether within weeks of their final logoff (as happened to Biba, Hyves, StudiVZ, Orkut, and MySpace). It is not cool to be on the same platform as your parents and teachers. The assumption is that the heroic gesture of the few who quit will eventually be followed by a silent exodus of the multitudes. While this may be inevitable in the long run, the constant migration from one service to the next does only increase the collective feeling of restlessness. According to Belgian pop psychiatrist Dirk De Wachter, author of *Borderline Times*, Western citizens are struggling

with a chronic feeling of emptiness. Intense social media use thus becomes part of a larger societal malaise, connecting a variety of issues from the echo chamber effect to ADHD and globalization. Instead of reading social media as a zeitgeist symptom, I approach the Internet Question here as an interplay between cultures of use and the technical premises of these systems.

There is a need to design daily rituals of sovereignty from the network. If we do this, we may no longer get lost in browsing, surfing, and searching, but when the techno-social routines become meaningless and there is nothing left to report, there is a similar danger of "rienisme." That's the moment when we need to come up with passionate forms of disengagement from the virtual world. The question is: How to lose interest into something vital? The issue here is different from the late twentieth century dialectic between remembering and forgetting. There is nothing to remember in Facebook – nothing but accidents. In the end, it is merely a traffic flow. In such a cybernetic environment, history becomes a question of managing eventless events. Because of its "tyranny of informality," social media are too fluid, secondary, and unfinished to be properly stored, and thus to be remembered. As a consequence, they can also not be forgotten. Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, author of *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*, may be right that all digital information can and will be stored. However, the architecture of today's social media is developing in the opposite direction. As temporary reference systems, hard to access with search engines, the streaming databases are caught in the Eternal Now of the Self.

Social Wisdom, anno 2013: "*You can't get a house mortgage based on your Facebook reputation*" (Jaron Lanier) – Ignore Requests – "*What I often do at 3 a.m., exhausted, yet unable to sleep, I sometimes browse on my twitter, reading banal nonsense to further raise my ire for the human race and listen to Tom Waits to restore my faith in humanity*" (Mickey MacDonagh) – Government of Temper – "*I'm no prophet. My job is making windows where there were once walls*" (Michel Foucault) – "*Bullshit is the new wisdom*" (@ProfJeffJarvis) – "*I know how it ends: one day I will be declared 'web-hostile' and liquidated. God, why is so much Internet theorizing so awful?*" (Evgeny Morozov) – Cataclysmic Communications, Inc. – "*Man ist zwar kreativ, aber das heißt noch lange nicht, dass man etwas schafft*" (Twitter) – Critique of the Enhancements – "*Facebook to Tell Users They Are Being Tracked*" (New York Times) – "*My data is bigger than your data*" (Ian Bogost) – "*Forums are the dark matter of the web, the B-movies of the*

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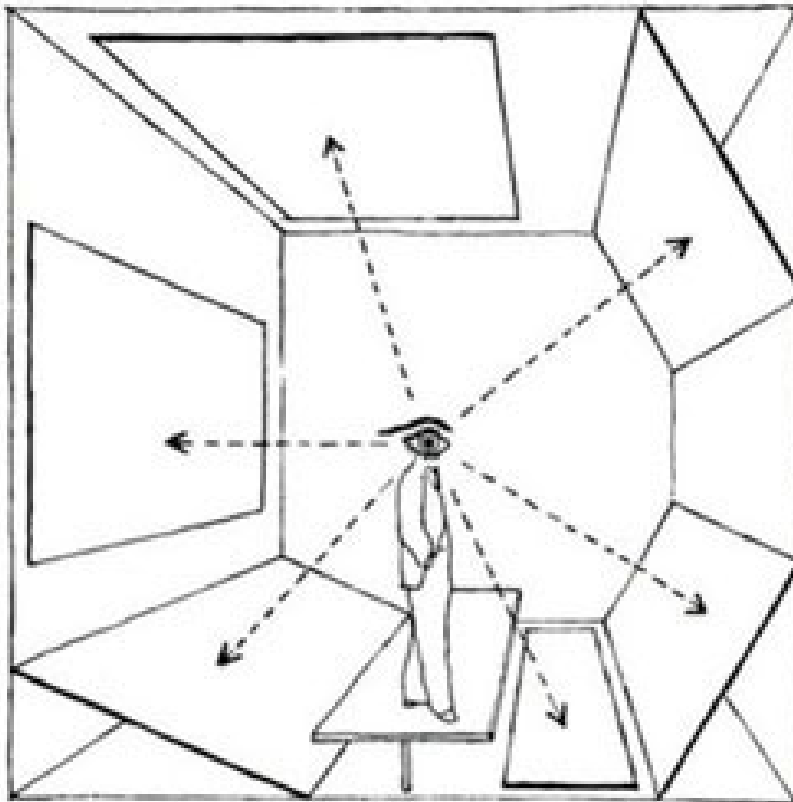
Internet. But they matter” (Jeff Atwood) – The necessary “haven’t we done this seventeen times already?” thread – “Since the world is evolving towards a frenzied state of affairs, we have to take a frenzied view of it” (Jean Baudrillard).

If we limit our scope to the internet debate, we can see that the New Age tendency that dominated the roaring 1990s has slowly but steadily lost supremacy. The holistic body and mind approach has been overruled by waves of conflict in society. The New Age faction shies away from negative critique, in particular of corporate capitalism. So Google still can’t be evil. Suspicion about the business model of internet start-ups will not and cannot arise. We use technology, they say, in order to “thrive.” In this positivist view, our will is strong enough to “bend” the machines in such a way that they will eventually start working for us – and not the other way around. If we as conscious citizen-consumers flock together, the business community will follow suit. There is no Facebook conspiracy (for instance their collaboration with the CIA) as we are Facebook. We are its employees, investors, first adoptors, app developers, social media marketers – in short, propagandists of a cause we do not understand. It is the technology that is disruptive, not those

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who complain about it. Those who unwittingly support the malignant social media cause which they naively believe to be a force for good are kept busy thinking they have signed up for a self-improvement course. The user is too busy “thriving” with the constant streams of tweets, status updates, pings, and emails, until it is time for the next gadget.

Is there a way out of the self-help trap that we have set up for ourselves? Why should we think of our lives as something that we need to manage in the first place? Take *The Information Diet: A Case for Conscious Consumption* (2012) by California IT professional Clay A. Johnson. The book is about information obesity and how to recognize its symptoms. Johnson discusses the ingredients of a “healthy” information diet and shows how we can we develop a data literacy that helps us be selective about the information we access. Information obesity arises, he says, when consensus in society over what is truth and what is not diminishes, when any odd piece of information can pass as vital scientific knowledge. For Johnson, the parallels between food and information consumption are all too real and go beyond metaphorical comparisons. There’s no such thing as information overload, he writes. It’s all a matter of conscious



Herbert Bayer, *Extended Field of Vision*, 1935.

consumption.

We can read as many facts as we like, but if we try to add them up, they refuse to become a system. We struggle to keep track of all the information that approaches us, making it hard for most info bits to be properly digested. This is the passive indifference that Jean Baudrillard celebrated during his lifetime, and which has now become the cultural norm. The result is “epistemic closure.” When we are constantly exposed to real-time interactive media, we develop attention fatigue and a poor sense of time. (Johnson says that his overconsumption of information impaired his short-term memory.) The info-vegan way out would be to work on the will power – an executive function that can be trained – with the goal of increasing one’s attention span. To start with you, can install RescueTime on your desktop, a program that tracks what you pay attention to and sends you a weekly productivity score.

As Peter Sloterdijk already noticed in his *You Must Change Your Life* (2009), training is key. The “anthropotechnic approach,” as Sloterdijk calls it, is different from the rational IT world of engineers in that in it is cyclical, not linear. It is not about concepts and debugging. Instead, it is about workouts. Self-improvement will have to come from inside, in the gym. If we want to survive as individuals while maintaining a relationship of sorts with (potentially addictive) gadgets and online platforms, we will have to get into fitness mode – and stay there. In extreme cases, visiting a Social Media Anonymous group might be helpful, but what average users need is merely a minor trigger to instigate the process of forgetting the gadget world.

Some may view the idea of improvement through repetition as conservative and anti-innovative. In an environment where paradigm shifts happen overnight, planned obsolescence – not durability – is the rule. But Sloterdijk’s emphasis on exercises and repetition, combined with Richard Sennett’s argument (in *The Craftsman* [2009]) in favor of skills, help us to focus on tools (such as the diary) that we can use to set goals in the morning and reflect in the evening on the improvements that we made during the day. However, the disruptive nature of real-time news and social media needs to find a place in this model. In the meantime, Sloterdijk remains ambivalent about the use of information technology. It is clearly not on his mind. In his recently published dairy covering the years 2008–2011 (called *Zeilen und Tage* and running to 637 pages), I counted precisely one entry that deals explicitly with the internet. In this short entry, he describes the internet as a universal bazaar and Hype Park *Gemüsekieste*. The same could be said of Slavoj Žižek, who admits that he

is not the world’s hippest philosopher.² Even though both use laptops and internet intensely, information technology has not (yet?) been an object of inquiry in their work.

Yet, there are public figures who do speak out. Take Vivienne Westwood, whose manifesto *Active Resistance to Propaganda* is a call to arms against information overload.³ She says we need to defend ourselves against the “abundance of everything,” of sound, images, and opinion, the non-stop distractions that keep us away from the important things in life, namely introspection and reflection. Westwood targets pathological consumption in particular. Quit updating, “get a life, artlovers unite.” However, what we need to overcome is not technology as such, but specific time spent consuming popular applications. Unlike knowledge, which we obtain or run into and then store, interpret, spread, and remember, our attitude towards how to deal with info overload and multitasking needs to be worked on constantly, otherwise we lose our “conditioning” and fall back into previous modes of panic and indifference. Dealing with data excess requires a 24/7 state of “mindfulness,” as it is called in New Age circles.

Whereas Clay Johnson is focused on the polarized world of the political news industry in the United States, Howard Rheingold, in his book *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online* (2012), discusses more explicitly the balance between the peaceful mind and a clever reorganization of the computer desktop. The idea is not, Rheingold writes, to capture the flow and to freeze-dry the incoming status updates, but to create a mental distance from the scene. It is all about feeling like you’re back in control, gaining confidence, and becoming independent again. There is a movement of tactical detachment at play here. In this context, the addiction metaphor is misleading. It is not about total involvement followed by complete withdrawal. In the case of social media, withdrawal is often not possible for social and economic reasons. Who can afford to endanger his or her social capital? Rheingold knows this and offers his readers a range of practical guidelines for how to master the master’s media.

What makes *Net Smart* and the accompanying online video lectures by Rheingold so compelling is not the author’s utopian message, nor his merciless deconstruction of the corporate agendas of the Silicon Valley giants. Rheingold is neither a net visionary à la *Wired* magazine editor Kevin Kelly, nor a continental European critic. However, he is a brilliant and nuanced instructor who believes in “internal discipline, not ascetic withdrawal.” *Net Smart* is a pamphlet in favor of public education. Self-control along with other social media literacy

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Joe Tilson, *Transparency - The Five Senses - Taste*, 1969, screenprint in acrylic moulded transparency case.

needs to be taught, Rheingold argues. We're not born with these skills. We need to learn how to practice "real-time curation." Following Daniel Siegel, author of *The Mindful Brain* (2007), Rheingold argues that we have to wake up from a life on automatic. Forget for a moment how many of us prefer this state of mind – killing time by using escapist social media, in non-spaces, surrounded by non-people, is widespread, and loved, as we all know. What Rheingold teaches us are tricks to train the brain – for instance, through breath exercises. He concludes the book by saying that "the emerging digital divide is between those who know how to use social media for individual advantage and collective action, and those who don't."

In my view, the best part of *Net Smart* deals with "crap detection," a 1960s term that indicates a critical attitude towards information. Using your "crap detector" meant that you inquired about the political, religious, and ideological background of the person who was talking. (*Let's do some fact-checking!*) Ernest Hemmingway and Neil Postman both argued that everyone needed a built-in crap detector. In today's age, where there are ten times as many PR agents as fact-checking journalists, internet users are supposed to do their own homework. How do we dissect the pseudo-information that comes from think-tanks and consultants? The postmodern insight that everything is "discourse" also contributed to the demise of the clear demarcation line between propaganda and truth. What I like is Rheingold's blend of old-school values concerning media manipulation coupled with a sophisticated knowledge of how to manage a range of online research tools, both in terms of their functionality and interface usability. Rheingold's screen is large, there are a lot of menus open at the same time, yet he is in charge. This is called personal dashboard design – and we don't hear enough about this, as the organization of one's desktop is supposed to be a private matter. Rheingold calls it "infotention," which he defines as "synchronizing your attentional habits with your information tools," with the aim to better "find, direct and manage information."

The different forms of social media are often portrayed as necessary channels of communication. For Rheingold and Johnson, they are here to stay. For the outgoing European baby boomers, however, these platforms may seem like nothing more than nihilist drugs which produce the constant feeling that we are being left out of something, that we are about to miss the boat. Linking, liking, and sharing uphold the systemic boredom and "rienisme" that is a consequence of the event inflation that we all experience. It therefore comes as a surprise to

read Tom Chatfield's *How to Thrive in the Digital Age* (2012) – a booklet in Alain de Botton's "School of Life" series – which claims to reinvent the genre of the self-help book. No more moralistic warnings and well-meaning tips, such as the one from Evgeny Morozov, who hides his iPhone and internet cable in a treasure chest when he has to work. Surprisingly, Chatfield's way out is to politicize the field in the spirit of the Arab Spring, Occupy, Wikileaks, Anonymous, pirate parties, and demonstrations in favor of online anti-copyright peer-to-peer exchanges (such as Kim Dotcom's recently launched Mega platform). We have received enough tips for how to carve out time away from our smart phones, he says. Offline romanticism as a lifestyle solution is a dead horse, and so is its philosophical equivalent of "interpassivity" as formulated by Robert Pfaller and Gijs van Oenen.⁴ While it may be liberating to let go of all our gadgets, to do nothing for a while, to pretend to live in accordance with nature and enjoy a well-deserved break, what do we but then? Venture into slow communication? For Chatfield, what comes after the information hangover are new forms of collective living. Through protests and other collective experiences, we find ourselves dragged into events, stories, situations, and people that make us forget all the yelling emails, Tumblr image cascades, and Twitter business-as-usual. When will the Long Wait be over?

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1

For the Unlike Us network, see <http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/unlikeus/>. On this website you can find extensive reports about social media and the internet, plus videos of Unlike Us #3, a conference on network culture which took place March 21–23, 2013 in Amsterdam.

2

See his interview with Salon.com at http://www.salon.com/2012/12/29/slavoj_zizek_i_am_not_the_worlds_hippest_philosopher/.

3

Read the manifesto at <http://activeresistance.co.uk/getalife/manifesto.html>.

4

See Robert Pfaller, *Ästhetik der Interpassivität*, Philo Fine Arts, Hamburg, 2008 and Gijs van Oenen, *Nu even niet, over de interpassieve samenleving*, Van Gennep, Amsterdam, 2011 (a dialogue between me with van Oenen on this topic appeared in *Theory and Event*, Vol. 15, No. 2, [2012]).

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