

The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom
Evgeny Morozov
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“Drop tweets, not bombs.” “Bombard Iran with broadband.” “Twitter is tyranny’s new nightmare.” Many, including me, have lauded the Internet as a promoter of democracy. We’d like to believe that the free flow of information will create a better world by encouraging freedom. We’d like to believe that the events occurring in the Arab world, the Arab Spring, are at least partially motivated by Internet technology, so are likely to endure. Arm people “with a powerful technology [and they can] triumph over the most brutal adversaries – regardless of what gas and oil prices are at the time”(7). Evgeny Morozov, author of *The Net Delusion*, argues convincingly, however, that this is not the case. Relying on both personal experience and a great deal of research, Morozov traces the history of what he comes to call “The Google Doctrine.” With its roots emerging even before Google existed, in the shadow of the giddiness and sense of superiority that followed the 1989 fall of the Soviet Union, came the idea that “technology, with its unique ability to fuel consumerist zeal—itself seen as a threat to any authoritarian regime—as well as its prowess to awaken and mobilize the masses against their rulers, [is] the ultimate liberator”(6). In response, Morozov contends that this doctrine is not only misguided but dangerous, causing the development of ineffective, Internet-centric policies that, in some cases replace long-term policies that proved more successful. Thus, relying on the Google Doctrine actually results in authoritarian governments being given advance warning, or a “heads-up” about emerging plans of the opposition, so that any benefit that could have been gained via the Internet is often lost. Completely open use of the technology can also result in significant hardship, and even death, to individuals living under authoritarian regimes: After the recent Iranian revolution failed, the Iranian government used Facebook to locate and arrest many of the dissidents.

Morozov points to a number of problems with the Google Doctrine, many of which stem from Western conceit and idealism. The notion that if we reduce the power of authoritarian governments, democracy will automatically emerge—“open the jar and democracy will pop out”—contains the conceited assumption that everyone wants to be like us. Further, the Google Doctrine also assumes that Westerners are the only ones clever enough to use technology; authoritarian governments will not be able to figure out how to harness internet technology for their own needs. And finally, there is the overly idealistic view that that somehow internet technology is different than past technologies. While every technology so far has had both positive and negative impacts, the Internet—it is assumed—is different. With this technology,

the impact will be a mostly positive force against authoritarian governments. Many of us buy into this argument, even with ample evidence that the Internet has not been a universal good in our own country. Cyber-crime, spam and pornography are just a few of the deleterious aspects of the Internet.

Morozov argues that it doesn't make sense to "treat the Internet as a deterministic one-directional force for either global liberation or oppression, for cosmopolitanism or xenophobia. Likewise, it is naïve to believe that such a sophisticated and multipurpose technology as the Internet could produce identical outcomes—whether good or bad—in countries as diverse as Belarus, Burma, Kazakhstan, and Tunisia"(29). Morozov rephrases Tolstoy: "While all free societies are alike, each unfree society is unfree in its own way" (29).

In 1989 authoritarian regimes, like those in Slovakia and Serbia, fell, while others, like those in Belarus and Kazakhstan, became further entrenched. Morozov, from Belarus where he watched the deterioration of democratic freedoms, initially became intoxicated with cyber-utopianism and joined a Western non-governmental organization which used blogs, social networks and wikis to promote democracy and media reform. After a few years of failure using these strategies, the organization experienced significant pushback from the government they were trying to change. Eventually Morozov became disillusioned, leading to the research for this book and his findings that the three pillars of authoritarianism—censorship, propaganda and surveillance—rather than being reduced—are often actually bolstered because of the presence of the Internet.

Despite the serious topic of this book, it is nevertheless very entertaining. It is sprinkled with terms such as *digerati*, *twitterati*, *spinternet* (a web with little censorship but lots of spin and propaganda), *civic promiscuity* (digital activism with little impact) and *slacktivist* (people who practice civic promiscuity). And it has funny chapter titles such as "Why the KGB Wants You to Join Facebook," "Orwell's Favorite Lolcat," and "Hugo Chavez Would Like to Welcome You to the Spintenet." Most importantly, the topics themselves are fascinating. For example, Morozov shatters the safety of the dictator's dilemma (censor and lose out on globalization, or not censor and risk revolution) by pointing out that the same applications that select those advertisements which are likely to be of interest to you can be used by authoritarian governments to censor sensitive material. He describes an East German study conducted between 1966 and 1990 about incipient protests in the *Tal Der Ahnungslosen*, "Valley of the Clueless," an area in East Germany where the government successfully blocked Western television signals. It turned out that having access to Western television actually made life in East Germany more bearable. Residents unable to escape their situations for a few hours each night via Western television were less satisfied with the East German regime. The study concluded that, "in an ironic twist for Marxism, capitalist television seems to have performed the same narcotizing function in communist East Germany that Karl Marx had attributed to religious beliefs in capitalism society when he condemned religion as 'opium of the people'"(65). Morozov reports that authoritarian governments don't really need to censor *non-political* speech. In fact, it was Kremlin ideologues who pioneered "The Tits Show" on Russian Internet television where a horny, slightly

overweight young man travels around Moscow nightclubs in search of perfect breasts. While civic activism is available on the Russian Internet, traffic is comprised mostly of entertainment and social media.

People have long been enamored with the idea of technological fixes to social and political problems. Morozov tells how the automobile was originally seen as a way to clean American cities polluted by horse manure. The telegraph was going to be “the nerve of international life, transmitting knowledge of events, removing causes of misunderstanding, and promoting peace and harmony throughout the world” (276). The airplane was “expected to foster democracy, equality, and freedom, ... to purge the world of war and violence; and even to give rise to a new kind of human being” (278). Similar hopes were raised with the invention of the radio, the television and the computer. *The Saturday Evening Post* claimed that “thinking machines will bring a healthier, happier civilization than any known heretofore” (281). Morozov clearly details how similarly deluded and overly optimistic many Internet utopians are about the power of the Internet for social and political change, supporting his arguments with 70 pages of references.

An interesting characteristic of the book is that Morozov argues his thesis without diluting it with foreign policy recommendations. This is commendable, in my view. However, Morozov does sometimes back himself into a corner avoiding foreign policy specifics. For instance, Morozov describes a time when Jordan imposed harsh restrictions on Internet freedom. A subsequent speech given by Secretary of State Clinton on Internet freedom, chastised Iran and Libya for their violations but never even mentioned Jordan. Morozov exposes this inconsistency to make the point that the U.S. sends a confusing message to foreign governments. Morozov does not take the next step either to admonish the U.S. to be more consistent or to suggest that inconsistencies are problematic but necessary in our fight to reduce the power of authoritarian regimes.

Morozov’s discussion of net neutrality—the idea that the Internet should be free of discrimination based on content, source or carrier—is limited to how the issue affects delusions about the Internet. He acknowledges that if the U.S. doesn’t support net neutrality, it will appear that the U.S. is willing to chastise China for Internet censorship but unwilling to chastise its own companies, such as Comcast, for also doing so. Morozov doesn’t, however, come out and say whether net neutrality is constructive or unrealistic. Instead, he says the term is ambiguous.

Part of the ambiguity, Morozov explains, lies in the two very different types of Internet freedom that exist, both often referred to under the same inclusive term. Morozov clarifies these by distinguishing the two:

1. Weak Internet freedom: protecting the Internet from censorship (net neutrality); and
2. Strong Internet freedom: using the Internet to promote freedom (229).

He admonishes the Obama administration for promoting the weak form of Internet freedom without realizing that much of the world believes he is promoting the strong form. He does not, however, take a stance on what kind of Internet freedom is or is not likely to hamper authoritarian regimes. Morozov clearly cares deeply about reducing the power of authoritarian

governments, yet seems to suggest that concepts such as *freedom of expression*, while a pillar of democratic society is nevertheless too abstract in this context and best avoided.

In the final chapter Morozov does attempt to suggest some foreign policy directions, but again his effort is short on specifics. In this last chapter he contrasts the deluded *cyber-utopians* (whom he has discussed throughout much of the book) with what he terms *cyber-realists*. The latter:

- struggle to use the Internet to impact specific foreign governments or regions but would not attempt a centralized Internet foreign policy;
- avoid highly general, abstract and timeless questions such as “How do we think the Internet changes closed societies?” in favor of “How do we think the Internet is affecting our existing policies on country X?” ; and
- not search for technological solutions to problems that are fundamentally political (318).

Morozov contrasts political problems, which are “wickedly difficult” due to their unbounded nature, with easier technological problems. Since he convincingly argues that technology alone cannot reduce authoritarianism, and he consistently steers clear of taking a political stand himself, Morozov has, in a sense, moved the issue away from his area of expertise. In a recent interview Morozov hinted that his next book will be on foreign policy. While I thoroughly enjoyed this book, I may not go out and buy the next.

This book should be read by anyone who believes the Internet will lead to greater democratization. It is a fascinating book for technophiles and people who study how technology affects society, politics and international relations. It should also be on the reading list of state department officials.