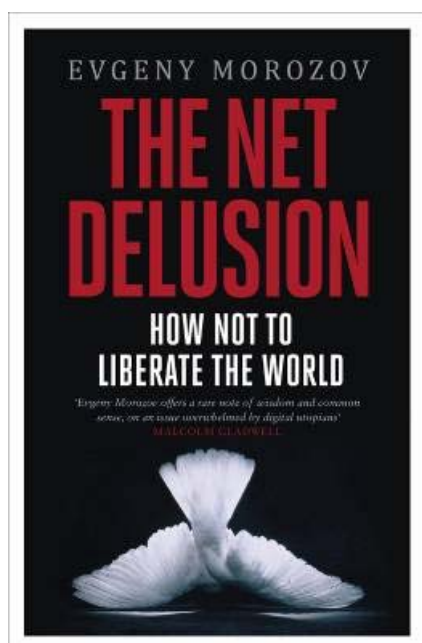# Reviews

THE NET DELUSION: How Not to Liberate the World, by Evgeny Morozov. Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2011, pp 408, GBP 14.99, ISBN 978-1-846-14353-3. Language: English

Evgeny Morozov, the author of *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* and Wael Ghonim, the young Google executive who helped galvanize Egypt's uprising in January, have much more in common than it would initially seem.

In his book, published just as the current wave of uprisings in the Middle East was starting, Morozov debunks what he calls the 'Google doctrine' for its 'enthusiastic belief in the liberating power of technology, accompanied by the irresistible urge to enlist Silicon Valley startups in the global fight for freedom', and chastises cyber utopians for their naïve and superficial faith in the emancipatory nature of online communication for the opening of authoritarian societies.

Meanwhile Ghonim, who was imprisoned for 12 days in January for his internet activism, gave an interview in Arabic to a popular broadcast on Egypt's DreamTV upon his release. When confronted with the pictures of the young men who had died during the uprising he cried and apologized to their families. His tears and his words, 'I am not a hero, because everyone was a hero… we have done what we have done because we love Egypt', electrified and energised the youth-led protesters and gave them resolve to continue their fight. In an interview on CNN, he described the uprising as 'Revolution 2.0'. Later, speaking at a TEDxEvent in Cairo, he showed what Morozov would probably classify as the most naïve form of idealism, when he said that Middle East's rebelling youth 'will win, because we have a dream', adding that 'the revolution started online, on Facebook'. He concluded that Egypt's uprising showed that, ultimately, 'the power of the people is much stronger than people in power'.

Throughout his book Morozov refutes the conviction, expressed here by Ghonim, that the use of internet tools, particularly social networks, makes the defeat of authoritarian regimes more likely. But his zealous and detailed critique of what he calls cyber utopianism and internet centrism is not aimed at accusing activists on the ground. Rather, using provocative

language, he accuses Western government officials, international journalists, scholars and media executives of being irresponsible and putting activists in danger. He says:

> there is absolutely no excuse for giving the air of intervening into internal affairs of either private companies or foreign governments while, in reality, Western policymakers are simply standing in the corner, daydreaming about democracy and babbling their wildest fantasies into an open mic. In most cases such "interventions" right no wrongs; instead they usually create quite a few wrongs on their own, producing unnecessary risks for those who were naïve enough to think of the US government as a serious and reliable partner (p. 14).

In *The Net Delusion*, Morozov refers widely to the 2009 post-electoral protest in Iran that failed to effect regime-change. The use of social media during the uprising, often referred to as a 'Twitter Revolution', allowed the Iranian government to set up a task force that successfully tracked down protesters, using online secret surveillance tools purchased from Western companies. Scores of protest participants and their leaders were arrested and tortured.

Morozov never minces words and his tone fluctuates between sarcasm and frustration. 'American pundits go to talk shows, Iranian bloggers go to prison' (p. 14), he bitterly charges, with some reason.

Ghonim's enthusiastic embrace of cyber idealism is fully understandable for Morozov, who was born in Belarus and has himself been a cyber utopian, promoting democracy in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet bloc with internet tools. The book is a reflection of personal disillusionment. 'Not only were our strategies failing', he says, 'but we also noticed a significant push back from the governments we sought to change' (p. xiv). *The Net Delusion*, he explains, 'is an attempt to come to terms with the ideology of cyber utopianism as well as a warning against the pernicious influence that it has had and is likely to continue to have on democracy promotion' (p. xiv).

Morozov criticizes internet centrism, which he describes as 'a philosophy of action that informs how decisions, including those that deal with democracy promotion, are made and how long-term strategies are crafted' (p. xv). This approach, he says, is flawed, because it is based on false premises. He states:

> if anything, Iran's Twitter Revolution revealed the intense Western longing for a world where information technology is the liberator rather than the oppressor, a world where technology could be harvested to spread democracy around the globe rather then entrench existing autocracies. The irrational exuberance that marked the Western interpretation of what was happening in Iran suggests that the green-clad youngsters tweeting in the name of freedom nicely fit into some preexisting mental schema that left little room for nuanced interpretation, let alone skepticism about the actual role the Internet played at the time (p. 5).

Based on these premises Morozov provides a wealth of examples concerning the way in which Western journalists and American officials politicized online activity in authoritarian countries. More importantly, in chapter after chapter Morozov maps in detail the different strategies employed by authoritarian regimes to use Facebook and similar local platforms to

enhance surveillance (Iran), fund pro-government bloggers, pollute and manipulate discussions that could be considered even vaguely dangerous and track down sceptical bloggers who could join the opposition (Russia and China), use social media like Twitter to entertain and ultimately dominate online discourse (Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez), decentralize censorship (China), and use crowdsourcing methods based on the religious and nationalistic beliefs of users to track down dissent (Saudi Arabia).

Paraphrasing Tolstoy he concludes that 'While all free societies are alike, each unfree society is unfree in its own way' (p. 29). Morozov's rich manipulation map emphasizes one of the main themes of *The Net Delusion*, namely that all communication technologies invented by humankind have been used for good and evil, and the internet is the latest and most powerful tool that technological progress has produced. Authoritarian regimes all over the world are as talented as their democratic counterparts at making use of internet technologies. In fact, new technologies make the work of controllers cheaper and more efficient, turning propaganda into an exciting and creative field. 'One of the most interesting and overlooked features of today's globalized world is how much and how quickly authoritarian governments seem to learn from each other', writes Morozov; 'any new innovations on Internet control by the most advanced are likely to trickle down to others' (p. 139).

Morozov provides a wealth of examples and mini-case studies throughout the book, particularly in chapter five, *Hugo Chavez Would Like to Welcome You to Spinternet*', chapter six, *Why the KGB Wants You to Join Facebook*, chapter seven – *Why Kiekergaard Hates Slacktivism* and chapter eight, *Open Networks, Narrow Minds*. The sarcastic titles are suggestive; each chapter is geared to prove that:

> despite the reductionist models that have made many in the West believe that information can destroy authoritarianism, information also plays an instrumental role in establishing propaganda, censorship and surveillance, the three main pillars of Orwell-style authoritarian control (p. 82).

On a few occasions, Morozov calls for:

> policies informed by a realistic assessment of the risks and dangers posed by the Internet, matched by a highly scrupulous and unbiased assessment of its premises, and a theory of action that is highly sensitive to the local context, that is cognizant of the complex connections between the Internet and the rest of foreign policymaking, and that originates not in what technology allows, but in what a certain geopolitical environment requires (p. xvii).

Morozov justifiably argues that deep local knowledge is vital, because it allows for consideration of the cultural, social and political context in which new technologies are deployed. The characteristics of the technology itself are secondary, because using the same internet centric approach in totally different contexts results in short-term apparent victories and long-term potentially catastrophic consequences.

Sadly, Morozov's call for context-based cyber realistic policies is not expressed in the same bold terms he reserves for his argument against internet centrism and technical determinism. He assures the reader that he does actually believe that technology can and should

indeed be used to promote democracy, but he does not develop a well-structured argument with constructive prescriptions.

It is only in the last three pages of the final chapter that Morozov reflects on cyber realism and outlines a few preliminary measures. Cyber realists should 'defy any attempt at centralization, placing as much responsibility for Internet policy on the shoulders of those who are tasked with crafting and executing regional policy' and 'on the desks of regional officers who are already highly sensitive to the political context in which they operate' (p. 318). Cyber realists should search for 'sensitive points of interaction between domestic and foreign policies' (p. 319). They should 'understand the limitations of doing politics online and should not label all activism as exclusively useful or harmful based solely on its outputs, its inputs, or its objectives. Instead, they should evaluate the desirability of promoting such activism in accordance with their existing policy objectives' (p. 319). Finally, cyber realists should

> focus on optimizing their own decision-making and learning processes, hoping that the right mix of bureaucratic checks and balances, combined with the appropriate incentive structure, would identify wicked [complex – FF] problems before they are misdiagnosed as tame [benign – FF] ones, as well as reveal how a particular solution to an Internet problem might disrupt solutions to other, not Internet problems (p. 319).

Overall, Morozov concludes that cyber realists should 'accept that the Internet is poised to produce different policy outcomes in different environments and that a policymaker's chief objective is not to produce a thorough philosophical account of the Internet's impact on society at large but, rather, to make the Internet an ally in achieving specific policy objectives' (p. 320).

To be heard properly, these prescriptions need to be developed further and to be anchored in results obtained from solid research into the social, economic and political impact of internet technologies in different local contexts. Such research findings are yet to be obtained. In their absence *The Net Delusion,* despite its valuable mapping of manipulation and control techniques, is a largely unreferenced, lengthy and aggressive dismissal of policies based on misplaced cyber utopianism.

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