The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom

By Evgeny Morozov
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The Net Delusion, by Evgeny Morozov, explores the role of the Internet in democratizing the world. Morozov explains the desire of the American people and officials to view the Internet as the great liberator of the masses, in what Morozov calls cyber-utopia. The book goes into lengthy dialogues about use of radio, television and propaganda pamphlets in Germany during the Cold War in helping to bring about liberation. However, the examples end up revealing perhaps American Officials got ahead of themselves then in declaring technology as a liberator and are once again falling into the same routine with the Internet. Morozov reveals exactly how authoritarian regimes can use the internet to the opposite means we desire, and how our contradictive beliefs in “Internet Freedom” may further hurt the concept of freedom through the net.

Evgeny Morozov research and writings revolve around international politics and foreign policy. Currently, Mr. Morozov is a contributing editor to Foreign Policy, and Boston Review, is a visiting scholar at Standford University, and a Schwartz fellow at the New America Foundation. Morozov was previously a Fellow at both Georgetown University’s Institute for the Study of Diplomacy and at the Open Society Institute in New York of where he remains on the board for the Information Program. As an accomplished writer his works have been published in The Economist, The Wallstreet Journal, and Newseek among many
other publications. Mr. Morozov maintains a Twitter account and blog, which users may follow.

Morozov begins the book with an explanation of the Google Doctrine. The Google Doctrine is the belief that Internet will provide free flowing information, which will open the eyes of people around the world to democracy and freedom. American officials and pundits were quick to announce the Internet and Twitter as the root of the Iranian protests in 2009, which ultimately fizzled. However, in the midst of the protest a government employee asked Twitter to forego maintenance to allow the protest to continue. While, no one could foresee the protests failing, the comment ultimate politicized the Internet and caused distrust of the American Internet. Morozov reveals that in the aftermath the amount of protestors actually using Twitter was minimal and attributed mainly to other Twitter users from outside Iran.

Morozov moves in an account of the role media played in the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall. While most remember the radio, television and pamphlets as being portrayed as the medium of liberation, a look in retrospect shows that making Western music and television available to the East actually made the citizens feel complacent with the authoritarian regime. Citizens found escape in the entertaining programming of the West and were able to cope with their political situation. Morozov relates this situation the 2009 protests in Iran and how quickly American politicians are willing to deem the Internet the liberator of the people.

The reality Morozov portrays though is light-years away from what Americans wish to believe. Dictators possess a greater understanding of technology than most would like to credit them with and are using it in ways that may in fact bolster support for themselves.
Dictators like Chavez utilize twitter to garner support for their regime, whereas the regimes of China and Russia use popular public figures to use various media outlets to garner support. Morozov makes the distinction between the desire for democracies in terms of the politics and the desire for Western lifestyle. He hypothesizes that given the availability of western culture through media and a capitalistic lifestyle, people tend to be more content with their authoritarian governments.

This is not to say censorship is not present. The most popular form is still to block URLs, but new ways to censor that are more difficult to detect. Countries like Russia and China allow citizens to report to government agency websites online content that is offensive, which is in turn taken down. There is also what Morozov “spinternet” where the government is able to respond to antigovernment statements through the art of spinning facts into a favorable light. Perhaps the best way a government can sensor by covering its tracks is the Distributed-Denial-of-Service Attack (DDoS) whereby a bug overloads a cite with fictional users so it shuts down the server. It is a bug that one cannot easily trace. Other tactics are outlined in the book, an each of these is seen as an affront on Internet Freedom by Americans.

With the term “Internet Freedom” being thrown around, what exactly does it mean? Morozov recognizes it is a term of art and it is like an inkblot test; it means different things to different people. Soft Internet Freedom typically takes on the meaning of protecting freedom of speech and expression and keeping things as the status quo where as hard-line Internet Freedom would be along the lines of breaking down the firewalls and allowing all content. The Federal Communication Commission has produced legislation bearing the name “Internet Freedom Act of 2010” that basically vies for network neutrality.
With all the preaching of the United States, Morozov notes the contradiction in our countries policies. American companies like Google and Facebook have little regard for privacy and further Facebook has engaged in censorship. American politicians want the firewalls broken down and provide the funding to train dissidents in other countries but deny technology companies the ability to provide many services to open access to these dissidents. Further, the U.S. practices censorship through instruments like Patriot Act, which Chinese officials used in defending some of their censorship practices. U.S. citizens have engaged in DDoS attacks with no repremand while American officials frown up it in other countries and call for government action.

Morozov suggest that the nation should turn from cyber-utopian ideals and become more like cyber-realists. Cyber-realists wouldn’t try to solve the world’s problems with technology. Cyber-realists would realize there are limits to practicing politics online. Policy makers should use the Internet as an ally in achieving objectives, instead of turning it into a philosophic movement. Most importantly, they would recognize that the effect the Internet could have on democracy is not something one could predict or control and would accept that the Internet will have different policy outcomes depending on the environment.

Morozov is able to make a strong argument that the nature and use of Internet by various countries around the world is not well understood. Censorship can no longer be thought of in terms of just blocking URLs. U.S. companies engage in the same type of data mining and censorship these authoritarian governments use. Further the U.S. government is not completely innocent in the world of censorship. The Patriot Act allows legal invasion of privacy and the FBI is looking into ways to use Internet information to learn about its citizens in the same ways as authoritarian governments are. America does not
punish its citizens for DDoS attacks. Censorship means in general there is not complete freedom of speech or expression. However, all countries wish to protect their citizens from certain evils like child pornography as Morozov points out. It is when authoritarian governments engage in these practices the Western world sees a violation of freedom information, speech and information.

The American ideal that Internet Freedom leads to democracy must be changed. It is naïve to believe that dictators would sit back and allow advancing technologies to oust them. Morozov presents numerous examples of dictators and communist regimes thriving on the Internet, garnering support for their governments. This should be no surprise as Morozov further points out based on the information you can find here on the web in the U.S. One could find websites about Al-Qaeda responsibility for 9/11 and then find a website that it was a U.S. conspiracy. There are always two sides available and it would be irresponsible of law makers in building Internet policies to ignore that authoritarian governments can use the Internet to bolster support just as it can be used to topple them.

This nonfiction novel was released in January 2011. Within weeks protest broke out throughout the Middle East. The world watched as the Egyptian government folded under the pressure its citizens’ protests. The relevance of this novel to the events unfolding before the world’s eyes cannot be denied. Morozov makes a compelling argument that perhaps policy makers do not possess a full understanding of how the Internet will affect authoritarian regimes. The ideals of freedom of speech and expression are among concepts American policy-makers hope will spread through breaking down the firewalls in other countries. However, Morozov’s point that the Internet’s effects will depend on the environment is currently being proven in the events in the Middle East.
Various forms of medium have been used to spread news of protest throughout the area, but the effects have varied tremendously. In Egypt the government crumbled, but not before shutting down the Internet in the city. Citizens still found a way to continue the protests. In Jordan the King took proactive steps to reform the government. The Iranian government cracked down with violence on anti-government protests as was the case in Libya. These protests are being credited to unemployment rates and failing economies, which also support Morozov’s idea that it is capitalist ideals other nations want, not necessarily democracy itself.

Morozov’s novel works hard to illustrate the conflict in Internet Freedom abroad. The topic is relevant and interesting and Morozov presents it in exactly that fashion. The material is easy to read, understand, and with its witty subsection headings entertains the reader. The substantial references section lets the reader know the material is well researched and supported. Morozov’s argument is well rounded and compelling. This is an excellent read for those with a professional or academic interest in Internet law, international politics, or policy-making.