The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom

by Evgeny Morozov

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In January 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave a highly touted speech on Internet freedom in which she stated, "The freedom to connect is like the freedom of assembly, only in cyberspace. It allows individuals to get online, come together, and hopefully cooperate. Once you're on the Internet, you don't need to be a tycoon or a rock star to have a huge impact on society." Evgeny Morozov, in his book *The Net Delusion*, takes great issue with the implication, however, that the so-called "Arab Spring" and "Twitter Revolution" were caused by unfettered access to the Internet. Instead, Morozov, a research academic, provides a cautionary tale about what he argues is any attempt to establish a monocausal relationship to meaningful political change (especially when that single focus is information technology).

The book opens with a discussion of cyber-utopianism and Internet-centrism—mindsets that focus on the positive ("emancipatory") aspects of Internet communication while ignoring the downsides. The argument throughout centers on nation-state policy (or lack thereof) that attacks the "wicked" problem of authoritarianism by, as a colleague of mine has dubbed it, "wiring the world." Morozov, expectantly, but importantly, cites the hedonistic world portrayed by Huxley and the "Big Brother" world of Orwell to consider both the proactive and reactive approaches to Internet freedom by authoritarian regimes. Interestingly, he notes that there is often a mix of both. Such regimes certainly use the anonymity and openness of the Internet to spy on their people and shutdown undesirable sites. But there is also a subtle approach that belies the jackboot on the keyboard methodology. While China may be known more for suppressing the Internet and for employing the masses to counter antiregime rhetoric, Russia imposes no formal Internet censorship. It relies on entertainment (porn is specifically cited) to soothe the masses, assuming that given options for political discourse and anything else, most opt for "anything else." (Hitler would understand.) And in nations where freedom is not widely understood from a western perspective, any bit of additional mindless diversion may be viewed as liberty by the populace.

Perhaps most importantly, Morozov rails against social media determinism as driving the end of authoritarianism, labeling it "an intellectually impoverished, lazy way to study the past, understand the present, and predict the future." He does not dismiss the value of Facebook and Twitter to quickly mobilize like-minded individuals. He notes as well that the development of that very like-mindedness is complex and potentially can be manipulated by

authoritarian governments using the same Internet freedom. Morozov's caution then is that policymakers must understand both the threats and opportunities posed by Internet freedom. The fact that authoritarianism still exists in its many forms serves as evidence to the complexity of the connections between the Internet and the rest of foreign policymaking. The winds of information may be "the oxygen of the modern age, seep(ing) through the walls topped by barbed wire" (Reagan), but the winds blow both ways. Policymakers must focus on the ends versus the means. What are the root causes of the wicked problem of authoritarianism in each of its individual cases? How will our foreign policy address them in order to achieve our interests recognizing the outcome may likely be the least-worst solution? Only when these tough questions are meaningfully and thoughtfully addressed can one turn to the Internet as one potential means (of many) to solve the problem. Furthermore, the threats of Internet freedom demand a consideration of potential regulations regarding its use in a globalized world. Examples of Google in China and Twitter in Iran come to mind. Once again, if one dismisses social media determinism and accepts that authoritarian governments can use Internet freedom to their own ends, what restrictions must liberal democracies consider in order to ensure protection and advancement of their own interests?

Morozov is not balanced in his approach. He skews sharply toward the threat of Internet freedom versus the opportunities it portends. He certainly addresses both, but the uninformed reader may not pick out the nuanced attempts at balance at the expense of supporting his thesis. Given that caution, *The Net Delusion* is an extremely well-researched and interesting book. It should definitely be read by policymakers, and it will be of interest to anyone who cares about the future of foreign policy which must include the role of unfettered access to information. This reviewer will admit to being a rather avid contributor to Facebook, Twitter, and blogging as a means of professional discourse. Not surprisingly, I began this reading leaning to the side of cyberutopianism. But Morozov's arguments were able to move me rather significantly toward the center; perhaps becoming a cyberrealist, if you will. Oliver Wendell Holmes noted, "If you resist reading what you disagree with, how will you ever acquire deeper insights into what you believe? The things most worth reading are precisely those that challenge our convictions." In that light, *The Net Delusion* was worth the read.