

TECHNOLOGY'S ROLE IN REVOLUTION: INTERNET FREEDOM AND POLITICAL OPPRESSION

By Evgeny Morozov

Revolutions depend on people, not on social media, and the Internet both promotes democracy and thwarts it, says a foreign-policy scholar. Cyber-utopians be warned: Authoritarian regimes are adapting to the Internet age.

The only place where the West is still unabashedly eager to promote democracy is in cyberspace. Enthusiastic belief in the liberating power of technology, accompanied by the irresistible urge to enlist Silicon Valley start-ups in the global fight for freedom, is of growing appeal to many policy makers. In fact, many of them are as upbeat about the revolutionary potential of the Internet as their colleagues in the corporate sector were in the 1990s.

We shouldn't give the Internet too much credit, however, and we should probably give it credit for

some of the negative things that are happening. We shouldn't be biased and just look at the brighter side. We should be more critical in thinking about its impacts.

The idea that the Internet favors the oppressed rather than the oppressor is marred by what I call cyber-utopianism: a naïve belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downside.

Cyber-utopians ambitiously set out to build a new and improved United Nations, only to end up with a digital Cirque du Soleil. Failing to anticipate how authoritarian governments would respond to the Internet, cyber-utopians did not predict how useful the Internet would prove for propaganda purposes, how masterfully dictators would use it for surveillance, and how sophisticated modern forms of Internet censorship would become.

Fidel Castro's Twitter page has been around for a few years. But very few people in Cuba own computers, because the Cuban government restricted the sale of computers to its population, so most of them just don't have the equipment to tweet. They don't have Internet cafés. They do have a small blogging culture, a few bloggers who have to be very careful. The government modified the restrictions on computers only a short while ago, so I wouldn't expect Facebook or Twitter to matter much in Cuba in the next five to ten years.

Take a closer look at the blogospheres in almost any authoritarian regime, and you are likely to discover that they are teeming with nationalism and xenophobia. Things don't look particularly bright for the kind of flawless democratization that some expect from the Internet's arrival.

Likewise, bloggers uncovering and publicizing corruption in local governments could be—and are—easily coopted by higher-ranking politicians and made part of the anti-corruption campaign. The overall impact on the strength of the regime in this case is hard to determine; the bloggers may be diminishing the power of local authorities but boost-

ing the power of the federal government. Authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, for example, have been actively promoting a host of e-government initiatives.

Normally a regime that fights its own corruption has more legitimacy with its own people. From that perspective, I wouldn't go so far as to say that the Internet is making the government more accountable, but I would say that it is making local officials more responsible.

The government may be eliminating corruption in the provinces, making the people happier, but that doesn't mean that they're eliminating corruption at the top. So the distribution of corruption might be changing. But I do think government might use the Internet to solicit more citizen input. That won't undermine the government. It will bolster its legitimacy.

It's not paradoxical. The fact that the government is soliciting their opinions does not mean that the government is listening to them. It wants to give the people the impression that it is listening to them. In some sense, it creates a semblance of democratic institutions. It's all about creating a veneer of legitimacy.

THE INTERNET'S ROLE IN MIDDLE EASTERN REVOLUTIONS

Digital activists in the Middle East can boast quite a few accomplishments, particularly when it comes to documenting police brutality, but I don't think the Internet will play much of a role in Middle Eastern democratic revolutions compared with other factors. The things to watch for are how the new leaders shape the new constitutions and how they deal with the elements of the previous regimes. All those things are far more important than what happens online. I wouldn't bet that the Internet will be a great help.

As for the extent to which these new regimes become democracies—it's a wild guess for anyone, me included. They have a chance, but outcomes will depend upon many factors, including internal policies and external conflicts. I don't buy into the cultural notion of Arabs not being ready for democracy. Democ-

racy in the Middle East may succeed. But it will depend on how they work with the existing challenges.

The revolts were driven by people who had economic grievances and were politically oppressed. They turned to the Internet to publicize their grievances and their resistance. The fact that new media and blogs were present probably set a different tempo to the revolts. If the Internet were not around, the regime might be tempted to crack down in a much more brutal way. The revolts themselves would be taking a different shape, and they may have happened three to six months later.

It's hypothetical to say how today's democratic revolutions would have happened without the Internet, but revolutions throughout history are driven by cultural factors. The events probably would have happened differently and probably would have turned out differently. We have to entertain the possibility that these events could have been much more violent and taken much more time if they hadn't had the publicity that they had thanks to the Internet.

But ultimately, a regime's response to a revolt depends on the regime, not on the Internet. Just because people can tweet and blog doesn't stop the Libyan government from instituting a violent crackdown.

In all, it's hard to generalize based on the future of the Internet. We don't have a one-size-fits-all approach to every country. We adapt our policies for each country. That's how foreign policy works. But with the Internet, we have a tendency to generalize that this must be how it works everywhere, and that isn't the case.

HOW RUSSIA HANDLES THE INTERNET AND ACTIVISM

While civic activism—raising money for sick children and campaigning to curb police corruption—is highly visible on the Russian Internet, it's still entertainment and social media that dominate. In this respect, Russia hardly differs from the United States or countries in western Europe. The most popular Internet searches on Russian search

engines are not for “What is Democracy?” or “how to protect human rights,” but for “What is love?” and “how to lose weight.”

The Kremlin supports, directly or indirectly, a host of sites about politics, which are usually quick to denounce the opposition and welcome every government initiative, but increasingly branches out into apolitical entertainment. From the government’s perspective, it’s far better to keep young Russians away from politics altogether, having them consume funny videos on Russia’s own version of YouTube, RuTube (owned by Gazprom, the country’s state-owned energy behemoth), or on Russia.ru, where they might be exposed to a rare ideological message as well.

Many Russians are happy to comply, not least because of the high quality of such online distractions. The Russian authorities may be on to something here: The most effective system of Internet control is not the one that has the most sophisticated and draconian censorship, but the one that has no need for censorship whatsoever.

I don’t think there is anything unique about Russia per se. It’s just that the government is smarter than the Egyptian government was about how to use the Internet. The Egyptian government didn’t do anything online. It didn’t engage in propaganda, deploy bloggers, or launch cyberattacks. They missed the train.

I think the difference is that the people who built up the Russian Internet ended up working for the government. The Egyptian government’s approach to the Internet was very shallow, and it had to pay the price, eventually.

Giving everyone a blog will not by itself increase the health of modern-day democracy; in fact, the possible side effects—the disappearance of watchdogs, the end of serendipitous news discovery, the further polarization of society—may not be the price worth paying for the still unclear virtues of the blogging revolution. This does not mean, of course, that a smart set of policies—implemented by the government or private actors—won’t help to address those problems.

YOU SAY YOU WANT A TWITTER REVOLUTION?

AUTHOR EVGENY MOROZOV’S NEW BOOK LOOKS CRITICALLY AT INTERNET-BASED DEMOCRACY ACTIVISM.

The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom by Evgeny Morozov. PublicAffairs. 2011. 408 pages. \$27.95.

In 2009, reports that dissidents in Iran were using Twitter prompted many Western commentators to proclaim that social media was fomenting a democratic Iranian revolution—only to be disappointed when the “revolution” fizzled and died. New America Foundation fellow Evgeny Morozov attributes the commentators’ misplaced hopes to cyberutopianism, a widespread but naïve expectation that the Internet will empower oppressed peoples and advance democracy.

According to Morozov, cyberutopians failed to anticipate that authoritarian regimes would also benefit from the Internet. In fact, such police states as Belarus and Iran pay bloggers to spread propaganda and frequent social-networking sites to monitor dissidents. Other states, such as Russia, disseminate crass enter-

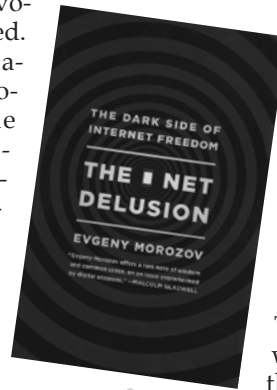
tainment through video-sharing sites to distract viewers from social and political issues.

Morozov debunks many widely held assumptions about how politically repressive states and their opposition both work. He follows with advice for democratic lawmakers who want to help the dissidents.

Pro-democracy lawmakers must engage with the Internet, he says, but they must observe how it impacts different countries in different ways and shape their policies accordingly: What works in Tunisia might not work in Burma. Also, they must never treat Web-based platforms as substitutes for diligent, committed human activists who mobilize people to action in real life.

The Net Delusion is a sobering assessment on the limits of Internet activism. It has practical advice for policy makers and non-profit activists across the globe.

—Rick Docksai



REVOLUTIONS REQUIRE TRAINING AND ORGANIZATION

The people who were instrumental in making the Egyptian revolution happen weren’t new to politics. Almost all of them were part of existing political and social forces. They had had plenty of training and organization by various Western foundations and governments. I

don’t think the view of this as being a spontaneous revolution was true. I myself have been to several democracy workshops in Egypt. I wouldn’t necessarily view these people as atomized individuals. They have been trained offline.

But of course, you wouldn’t have heard as much about it. Who’s paying for those workshops? It’s the U.S. government and U.S. founda-



Web users fill the seats at an Internet café in Chengdou, China. Despite the hopes of some democracy activists, the profusion of the Internet in China has so far not undermined China's authoritarian political system. As New America Foundation scholar Evgeny Morozov argues, authoritarian regimes around the world are adapting to—and sometimes prospering from—the spread of digital media.

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tions. In this sense, Facebook and Twitter are much better covers, because the uprisings they enabled appeared to be spontaneous. It would be very misleading to suggest that all the connections forged by these activists are virtual. Revolution is much more about building human networks.

In 1996, when a group of high-profile digerati took to the pages of *Wired* magazine and proclaimed that the “public square of the past” was being replaced by the Internet, a technology that “enables average citizens to participate in national discourse, publish a newspaper, distribute an electronic pamphlet to the world ... while simultaneously protecting their privacy,” many historians must have giggled.

From the railways, which Karl Marx believed would dissolve India's caste system, to television, that greatest “liberator” of the masses, there has hardly appeared a technology that wasn't praised for its ability to raise the level of public debate, introduce more transparency into politics, reduce nationalism, and transport us to the mythical global village.

In virtually all cases, such high hopes were crushed by the brutal forces of politics, culture, and economics. Technologies tend to overpromise and underdeliver, as least on their initial promises.

Which of the forces unleashed by the Web will prevail in a particular

social and political context is impossible to tell without first getting a thorough theoretical understanding of that context.

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. There is so much diversity across authoritarian regimes. I wouldn't have much hope in the Internet in North Korea. First, it's a country with some of the fewest Internet connections in the world. And second, average North Koreans have been brainwashed to such an extent that you have serious psychological challenges that you can't overcome just by using blogs and Twitter. It would be much harder than for a country like Belarus, for example, where one-third of the country is online. Mobile phones might play a role in getting more information out. But it's unlikely that Facebook or Twitter will play much of a role.

Policy makers need to abandon both cyber-utopianism and Internet-centrism, if only for the lack of accomplishment. What would take their place? What would an alternative, more down-to-earth approach to policy making in the digital age—let's call it cyber-realism—look like?

Cyber-realists would struggle to find space for the Internet in existing pillars. Instead of asking the highly general, abstract, and timeless question of “How do we think the Internet changes closed societies?,” they would ask “How do we think the Internet is affecting our existing policies on country X?” Instead of operating in the realm of the utopian and the ahistorical, impervious to the ways in which developments in domestic and foreign policies intersect,

cyber-realists would be constantly searching for highly sensitive points of interaction between the two.

They wouldn't label all Internet activism as either useful or harmful. Instead, they would evaluate the desirability of promoting such activism in accordance with their existing policy objectives.

Cyber-realists wouldn't search for technological solutions to problems that are political in nature, and they wouldn't pretend that such solutions are even possible. Nor would cyber-realists search for a bullet that could destroy authoritarianism—or even the next-to-silver bullet, for the utopian dreams that such a bullet can even exist would have no place in their conception of politics.

Instead, cyber-realists would focus on optimizing their own decision-making and learning processes, hoping that the right mix of bureaucratic checks and balances, combined with the appropriate incentives structure, would identify wicked problems before they are misdiagnosed as tame ones, as well as reveal how a particular solution to an Internet problem might disrupt solutions to other, non-Internet problems.

Most important, cyber-realists would accept that the Internet is poised to produce different policy outcomes in different environments and that a policy maker's chief objective is not to produce a thorough philosophical account of the Internet's impacts on society at large, but, rather, to make the Internet an ally in achieving specific policy objectives. For them, the promotion of democracy would be too important an activity to run it out of a Silicon Valley lab. □



About the Author

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This article draws from his book as well as an interview with staff editor Rick Docksai, which may be read at wfs.org.

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