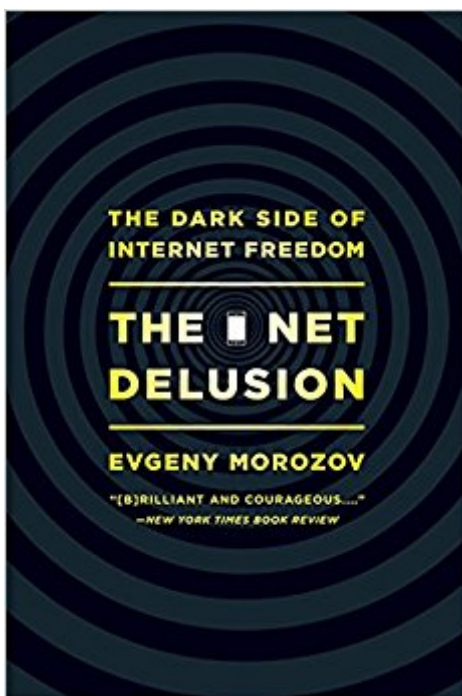


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The Net Delusion: The Dark Side Of Internet Freedom



Synopsis

Updated with a new Afterword • The revolution will be Twittered! • declared journalist Andrew Sullivan after protests erupted in Iran. But as journalist and social commentator Evgeny Morozov argues in *The Net Delusion*, the Internet is a tool that both revolutionaries and authoritarian governments can use. For all of the talk in the West about the power of the Internet to democratize societies, regimes in Iran and China are as stable and repressive as ever. Social media sites have been used there to entrench dictators and threaten dissidents, making it harder • not easier • to promote democracy. Marshalling a compelling set of case studies, *The Net Delusion* shows why the cyber-utopian stance that the Internet is inherently liberating is wrong, and how ambitious and seemingly noble initiatives like the promotion of • Internet freedom • are misguided and, on occasion, harmful.

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Customer Reviews

Winner of the 2012 Goldsmith Book Prize • A New York Times Notable Book of 2011 • Michael Walzer, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton • Evgeny Morozov is wonderfully knowledgeable about the Internet; he seems to have studied every use of it, or every political use, in every country in the world (and to have read all the posts). And he is wonderfully sophisticated and tough-minded about politics. This is a rare combination, and it makes for a powerful argument against the latest versions of technological romanticism. His book should be required reading for every political activist who hopes to change the world on the

Internet. • Thomas P.M. Barnett, author, • The Pentagon's New Map, and senior managing director, Enterra Solutions LLC • Evgeny Morozov has produced a rich survey of recent history that reminds us that everybody wants connectivity but also varying degrees of control over content, and that connectivity on its own is a very poor predictor of political pluralism •. By doing so, he's gored any number of sacred cows, but he's likewise given us a far more realistic sense of what's possible in cyberspace • both good and bad • in the years ahead. Morozov excels at this sort of counter-intuitive analysis, and he instantly recasts a number of foreign policy debates with this timely book. • Stephen M. Walt, Belfer Professor of International Affairs, Harvard University • Net Delusion is a brilliant book and a great read. Politicians and pundits have hailed the Internet as a revolutionary force that will empower the masses and consign authoritarian governments to the ash-heap of history, but Morozov explains why such naïve hopes are sadly misplaced. With a keen eye for detail and a probing, skeptical intelligence, he shows that the Web is as likely to distract as to empower, and that both dictators and dissidents can exploit its novel features. If you thought that Facebook, Twitter, and the World Wide Web would trigger a new wave of democratic transformations, read this book and think again. • Malcolm Gladwell

Evgeny Morozov (@evgenymorozov) is the author of To Save Everything Click Here. He is a senior editor to The New Republic. His articles have appeared in the New York Times, the Financial Times, the Economist, the Wall Street Journal, the London Review of Books, and many other publications. His monthly column comes out in Slate, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Germany), El Pais (Spain), Corriere della Sera (Italy), and several other newspapers. He was born in Belarus.

This book's title is obviously a play on words and echoes Richard Dawkins' "The God Delusion." I don't exactly mind the fact that this author is so long-winded because his prose is very easy to follow. He does overstate his case a bit, but what I come away with is: 1. New terms.

Internet-centrism (don't try to reinterpret every single problem in terms of how it can be solved by the internet) and cyber-utopianism (don't imagine that the internet will lead to every single perfect outcome just because you think it will). Samizdat? (I'd never heard of that word before. But it is in the Oxford Dictionary.) 2. The use of the internet as a tool can go both ways. So, interest groups can learn to organize with it. But whatever government that happens to be in power in whatever place can also learn to use that tool in its own service. 3. McDonald's is a quintessentially American invention and it is everywhere. And no one sees it as such because the State Department of the US government does not make any connections or try to use it as a tool. The internet is the same way,

and it was neutral at some point....but companies that provide internet services can be seen as an instrument of subversion if the State Department tries to enlist their services on its behalf. (Ever wondered why Twitter and Youtube are blocked in China? You don't need to wonder anymore after reading the first chapter of this book.)4. The Iranian "Revolution" was completely fictional. Or, the presentation of it was the composite of a lot of wishful thinking. There is a lot of what we (this reader) already knew:1. There are a lot of unintended consequences to any policy. And this could be deduced from the unintended consequences of a lot of things that have already gone down (that the author detailed) and that we might expect (because no two countries are quite the same);2. Most of the policymakers in the United States ("The West") don't really know what they are doing and are very likely guilty of over optimism.3. Basically policymakers don't know what they are doing and act on flawed models. One of the concepts that he introduced was the difference between "wicked" and "tame" problems. But I feel that the issue of decision making was covered much better in Thomas Sowell's *Knowledge And Decisions*4. It is not appropriate to treat political problems (with political constraints and incentives) as internet problems. We already knew that. There is some subtle discussion of the epistemic perspectives on populaces under authoritarian government. What Morozov gives is a Huxley-Orwell axis. On one end, the population is strangled by consumerism and popular goods. And on the other, it is strangled by an invasive bureaucracy that is reading mail and tapping phone calls. Our writers shows that this is likely to be a false dichotomy and that some elements of both can be mixed. A regime can keep people so busy watching TV that they don't have time to know what is going on (and I have witnessed this) but then censor the internet and block blogs that might distract them from watching TV. I'd say that this book could be taken out in about 3 afternoons (100 pages each). Or, for a more leisurely pace it should not take more than 6 afternoons of reading time. There are quite a few concepts in here, and the way that the author organized them needed some help. On one hand, some of the concepts were organized in bite sized pieces that took about 15 minutes to read. But on the other hand, he kept repeating the same overarching concepts AGAIN AND AGAIN within the sub-chapters. The chapters averaged about 35 pages each. Verdict: If the book was 225 pages, I could say that it would have been worth the reading time. But this author just waffled on way too long repeating the same things OVER AND OVER.

A favorite subject of my reading is modern technology and how it is rapidly changing everything about human society. Not least among our tech products is the net in the book title. There is much about contemporary technology tending to delude us with views of a future more optimistic than may

be warranted. Contrariwise it is clear the net is not 'the' solution so much as a very complex tool for human interaction. I hope that is not entirely true because I can know, in detail, how it affects my life and how I am planning on such help in future. Nonetheless in the long term technologists seem unwilling to consider all effects and affects of tech. (My first encounter with 'webs' was the 1950's. At that time experience was with 'webs' created for, and restricted to specific objectives (i.e. SAGE and Arpanet both rudimentary webs by comparison). Nothing better illustrates absence of tech forethought than intensity with which we use and are seduced by web convenience. Now a very general tool. Morozov brilliantly looks at both sides of web use - the productive and the destructive as well as a source of pointless distraction, maybe its worse feature. So far we have clearly learned how it can put all of us in touch with each other for all benefits that provides. But this positive has disadvantages Morosov discusses in detail. For example, that the web enabled popular criticism of Iran government policy also created a government tool for tracking sources of criticism to be dealt with severely, and apparently was. Making everyone's thoughts and personal data readily available leaves each of us open to contact without our consent let alone easily personally devastating. Personal security is a largest loss coming with web tech through social media. There is no security of personal identity information if a 'keylogger' happens to be lurking in web space awaiting a chance to be mischievous or malicious. Potential magnitude of impact from this sort of use is extremely large. Everyone has read about how MILLIONS of credit cards, with their personal information, have been stolen from Target, Home Depot, etc. Petty web theft? Morozov makes the point we should not, as we are, correct tech problems with more tech. Solutions used to government censorship are to create a tech correction circumventing it. The author uses North Korea as an example. In this case the solution chosen was to circumvent that government's attacks through the WWW without pursuing diplomatic or political leverage, i.e. tendency to use tech instead of human interaction. Using the web we may find interest or pleasure in having hundreds, in some cases millions, on our Twitter or Facebook account without the burden of knowing them 'personally'. This book makes a nice complementary use with his second book published in 2013 - "To Save Everything Click Here". The amount of detail in these two books beggars a summary. They were a surprise to me since the author is an accomplished communicator through writing but not so much through speaking.

Prone to pithy codas "It's as if the Mad Men have set up an office in Beijing" as well as name and theory dropping (presumably those who still have 24x7 Internet access will run off to look them up) but otherwise a scathing review of misplaced optimism for the Internet, and how somewhat

not democratic systems can run circles around the now cold warriors of an bygone era (firewalls! in cyberspace!) by co-opting technology, embracing counterspin, and even the use of modern Western marketing techniques to better control their populace. I am reminded of the old Calvin and Hobbes cartoon in which Calvin offers a tepid bowl of tapioca to the television. America does no better, banning software and services to certain countries, while the other hand feeds the dissidents of said countries, who cannot use the necessary software or services because they are banned—”a computer would segfault at this point; humans must make do with the facepalm. But I must run; there is a cute cat photo I really have to see. No, actually, yet more security updates to apply. Sigh.

Jeremy Internet Plumber

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