Omnipresent Technologies—Omnipresent Democracies? Morozov's critique of serious online activism

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Digital communications technologies are transforming activist politics. Recent activists are tactically integrating social media software like Facebook and Twitter into broader strategies to organise consolidated, democratic, counter-regime movements in various autocratic countries, primarily in the Middle East. The hope is that authoritarian elites will be unable to suppress uprisings, given activists' extensive adoption of these versatile, physically mobile and cheap electronic communication technologies: 'tech savvy' politicised people within social movements will be able to use the internet to *determine* the liberation of citizens in oppressive states.

In *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World*, Evgeny Morozov critically examines this 'Google Doctrine': the argument that using widely available, cheap technologies to organise radical protest will disseminate liberal claims and subsequently instigate social change. The doctrine is consistent with arguments that once internet users learn about the horrors of oppressive regimes, their violations of human rights and their aversion to democracy, autocratic rule becomes untenable; autocratic regimes cannot survive once mass data start to flow freely and spread amongst increasingly digitised, politicised and agitated people. Questioning this received wisdom about the internet's potential to be a key tool in the promotion of democracy, Morozov identifies it with what he calls 'internet centrists', who have 'inflated expectations of what can be achieved' by 'netizens' engaging in 'technological activism' (p.5). He argues that internet centrism has a tendency to lapse into 'cyber-utopianism'.

The perspective offered by some of the *digerati*—influential commentators within the digital literati—'that the internet favours the oppressed rather than the oppressor' (p.viii), is questionable because it excludes analysis of how authoritarian regimes successfully use the technology themselves (often with equipment and knowledge imported from the West). Governments of all kinds have recognised the internet's potential, quickly gained technical knowledge, and used technologies (not just the internet) for their own purposes, such as censorship, surveillance and security. Those in authority now routinely use cyber-space as a means of socio-political and political-economic control.

It is asserted by Morozov, therefore, that in order to truly take advantage of the internet to fight autocratic regimes, activists in democratic social movements have to undertake objective assessments of what this technology can and cannot offer.

In doing so, they need to remain mindful of local contexts and the complex arrays of interactions between nation states' motives, geopolitical conditions and foreign policy influences. Moreover, the notion that internet-driven campaigns in autocratic states lead to massive systemic change, is a 'cyber-utopian' myth which emerged from selective interpretations of history that underemphasise the use of technology to maintain structural conditions within the world-system. Considering this broadly, Morozov mentions how Marx believed that the railway network across India would help eradicate Indian society's caste system; and how arguments that television would liberate everyday people turned out to be flawed, a point that may have surprised inventors like Buckminster Fuller but would not have surprised those like writer Ray Bradbury (p.281). The potential of technologies to free people in autocratic states, be it through the telegraph, radio or internet, has been countered by elite political forces. Technologies have enabled people to exercise a broadening degree of agency in some cases, yet the parameters of that agency continue to be governed by authorities and their uses of technology.

The underlying basis of this debate concerns economics as well as logistics. The cyber-utopians argue that faxes of the 1980s, blogs and social networks have changed the economics of protesting and resistance, thus enabling people to rebel against autocracy. Thus, if one provides enough internet connectivity, democracy and civic peace follow. The underlying assumption—what Morozov calls hybrid liberalism—is that everybody living under an oppressive regime and who has access to outside media, will also be receptive to, and fight for, the ideals of liberal democracy. The problem with this scenario is that it does not verify the 'actual with the intended use' of the technological base. The idea that new media will avert social conflict is flawed in that sometimes, some media outlets have actually fuelled conflict.

Morozov argues that despite western media reports about the emancipatory effects of social media, such as its use to circumvent censorship, the significance of social media in the 2009 Iranian Green Revolution (at a time when cyber utopianism seemed at a height) was exaggerated. It was widely reported in the west that Iranian activists, inside and outside of Iran, were using social media software to organise uprisings against the autocratic Iranian authorities. As a result it was believed among western commentators, almost with technological triumphalist exuberance, that the regime in Iran would experience great difficulty suppressing rebellion, given that young people were using software such as Google, Twitter, Facebook and writing blogs. As Morozov notes, the operational nature of networks means that this expansion and diffusion of new communications technologies is also good for the Iranian authorities, who areable to collect open source intelligence about activists' internet activities. Consequently protesters' use of internet technology has failed to create correspondingly widespread democratic movements.

Recently we have seen the emergence of what Morozov called the 'Spinternet'— a combination of spin and sophisticated propaganda on the internet— disseminated by authorities to their own citizens and foreign observers in the states' interiors. Some states have paid bloggers to access blogs and leave regime-

friendly ideological comments on discussion boards. Morozov argues that this is happening because censorship is simply less effective on the internet than sophisticated propaganda transmission. Authoritarian states seem aware that the more they attempt to censor web material that criticises their regimes or informs audiences about a particular event, the more it motivates people to spread the news around the internet. Thus, the most effective way to control the message is to spin it—such as to accuse a critic of being paid by western intelligence. Morozov cites the example of the Chinese state, which employs 'netizen' investigator bloggers to leave opinion and messages on popular social blogs.

Authoritarian governments' strategy of reaching out to critics and engaging them in various ways has often strengthened the political position of autocratic states. Most of these states operate in an 'information vacuum', meaning that they are deprived of all the intelligence information they need to identify and assess any forming threats facing the government. The generation of overt, politically-dissenting activity online is therefore tolerated, since government personnel would otherwise have to collect and analyse data that is more difficult to access. Furthermore, involving the online public in public discussion and decision making is a clever idea, since it enables governments to claim that they are undertaking democratic initiatives incorporating a plurality of political opinion. They use this to support their own legitimacy. It also helps disseminate blame when oppressive policies ultimately become intolerable in some quarters and there is collective counteraction against the government.

Another significant flaw in cyber utopianism is the argument concerning 'digital natives'—those who have grown up with the Internet. It is often argued that people are getting more politically involved because of cyber-activism. There is no doubt, for example, that the internet has empowered some young people enormously. But *how* it has empowered them is the key question. It plays a different role for them. There is a myriad of ways in which people interact online, which may not lead to any engagement in political activism. In addition, notions of cyber-hedonism seem underplayed—many are becoming politically passive because of the assumption that the internet will be the basis of socio-political transformation that will motivate people into grassroots activism, while in reality it could be keeping people atomised, watching apolitical material such as online entertainment and gaming. What has been shown is that what attracts people to the internet are not necessarily opportunities to learn about political situations but material like low grade western TV programming.

As Morozov argues, it is necessary to stop thinking about the number of computer devices per capita in developing authoritarian states and instead consider how we can counter cyber-utopian arguments while engaging with and empowering members of civil society. This book advances that alternative agenda by helping activists reading it to continue their political activities with an added awareness of how authorities are also using new media for political purposes.

This is a thought-provoking study of how the internet can actually impede democratisation rather than promote. Morozov's cautioning against exaggerated claims, such as internet use being an effective way to initiate successful rebellious

mass organisation, and his analyses of how multinational companies and authoritarian state authorities exploit internet technologies to maintain the political economic and socio cultural status quo, should be seriously considered by anyone studying this area. Broadly, the text makes a very significant contribution to literature concerning the widespread uses of technology and their impacts on the social and political conditions of societies. More specifically, it adds to our understanding of ways in which social movements can realistically achieve goals by recognising and exploiting the socio-political impacts of the internet.