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# Liberation technology: dreams, politics, history

Armine Ishkanian, 05th April 2011

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The doctrinal commitment to new cyber and social technologies as a means of solving political problems needs to learn from the past and take a more realistic view, says Armine Ishkanian.

## About the author

Armine Ishkanian is a [lecturer](#) [14] in NGOs and development in the department of social policy, London School of Economic. Her books include *[Democracy Building and Civil Society in Post-Soviet Armenia](#)* [14] (Routledge, 2008)

The popular uprisings in the middle east and north Africa have invigorated arguments about the power of new information and communication technologies (ICT), even their potential to usher in the new world of democracy, sustainable development and good governance that progressives wish to see. A celebration of the emancipatory potential of these new technologies, the social-network sites Facebook and Twitter in particular, is now a regular current in their discourse.

Most “cyber-utopians” (as [Evgeny Morozov](#) [15] calls them) or “liberation technologists” (as some refer to themselves) recognise the obstacles in their way: in particular, that authoritarian regimes are adept at using internet censorship, surveillance and monitoring to blunt the emancipatory momentum. But they go on to argue that further technological advances can help circumvent the “the great [firewall](#)” [16] of China” and its equivalents.

The new tools and technologies certainly provide unprecedented means of connecting and coordinating. But there should be [caution](#) [17] about reproducing technologically determinist and normative arguments which are often unsupported by strong empirical evidence or rigorous research. The danger is that such determinism combines with the eager expectation among politicians, policy makers, and development practitioners that the technologies can deliver immediate and dramatic results.

There is a vibrant debate between the “cyber-utopians” and their critics, such as Evgeny Morozov, the author of *[The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom](#)* [18] (see John

Lloyd, "[Mightiest for the mightiest](#) <sup>[19]</sup>", 25 March 2011). This, however, isn't simply between those "for" or "against" technology: it is about reaching for a more sophisticated, realistic and grounded assessment.

## Civil Society 2.0

The United States is playing the leading role globally in advancing "internet freedom", reflected in its award of \$20 million in 2008-10 to support the work of digital activists. A diplomatic initiative - [21st Century Statecraft](#) <sup>[20]</sup> - aims to make diplomacy more innovative by fusing the new technologies with traditional foreign-policy tools.

Only four days after Hosni Mubarak's resignation as Egypt's president on 12 February 2011, the US secretary of state Hillary Clinton committed a further \$25 million to its [Civil Society 2.0 initiative](#) <sup>[21]</sup>, which aims to "help grassroots organizations around the world use digital technology to tell their stories, build their memberships and support bases, and connect to their community of peers around the world." The state department's website announces that under its auspices "experienced technologists" will be dispatched around the world to teach civil-society organisations how to blog, build a website and leverage social networks for a cause.

Hillary Clinton, [defining](#) <sup>[22]</sup> the internet as the "public space of the 21st century", commits to supporting the struggle for internet freedom through investing "in the cutting edge [technologies] because we know that repressive governments are constantly innovating their methods of oppression and we intend to stay ahead of them". She also makes a [comparison](#) <sup>[23]</sup> between the struggle for internet freedom today and the experiences of supporting dissidents and the production of *samizdat* (underground self-publications) during the cold war. The struggle for internet freedom thus becomes part of the struggle for human rights, freedom and dignity.

But will approaches aimed at developing ever more cutting-edge technologies and tools really strengthen civil society and democracy? In considering this question, I draw on the [experience](#) <sup>[24]</sup> of democracy-promotion in the aftermath of the revolutions in east-central Europe in 1989.

## Civil Society 1.0

The fall of the Berlin wall in [1989](#) <sup>[25]</sup> and the ensuing chain of revolutions was followed by a huge and expensive effort from western donor agencies, led by the United States, to build and strengthen the institutions of civil society in the post-Soviet countries, and to train civil-society activists as a means of [promoting](#) <sup>[26]</sup> democracy, good governance and the development of market economies. More than two decades on, the US remains the largest single global donor of democracy-building and civil-society support programmes.

The broad experience of these programmes during the 1990s suggests that externally [funded](#) <sup>[27]</sup> democracy-promotion projects are very good at creating institutions and structures, but less successful at producing sustainable, vibrant and engaged democratic constituencies and civil societies. In other words, they helped create a lot of NGOs, but not civil society.

Moreover, these [programmes](#) <sup>[28]</sup> were most effective in those eastern and central European countries where integration into the European Union acted as an "effective tool of democracy-promotion" by providing incentives for the leadership of democratising countries to pursue internal changes. There was progress here, many democratic institutions and practices were

established in the region; but it took time, and the enlargement approach cannot easily (if at all) be replicated elsewhere.

Mary Kaldor argues <sup>[29]</sup> that after 1989 everyone celebrated the idea of civil society, but the idea was “rapidly reduced within the framework of neo-liberal thinking to mean western-supported NGOs who would help to smooth the path of neo-liberal transition.” This NGO-isation of civil society in many former socialist countries was but one unintended consequence of “Civil Society 1.0” policies.

A more worrying problem was that the foreign funding of civil-society groups led to a backlash against not only NGOs, but the very ideas of democracy and civil society. The ex-post-facto justification for the Iraq war as a form of democracy-promotion coupled with the perceptions of Washington’s “shadowy guiding hand” in the “colour revolutions” in Georgia <sup>[30]</sup> (2003) and Ukraine <sup>[31]</sup> (2004) intensified scepticism toward democracy and civil society in (among others) Russia, China, and Nigeria.

Some of the policy analysts and academics who were influential in shaping the post-cold-war “Civil society 1.0 policies” are now engaged in the development of the thinking around internet freedom. Several are affiliated with the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law <sup>[32]</sup> (CDDRL) at Stanford University, which runs a Program on Liberation Technology. They include the CDDRL’s director Larry Diamond, Francis Fukuyama and Michael McFaul; Evgeny Morozov is also a visiting scholar <sup>[33]</sup> there.

The Program on Liberation Technology <sup>[34]</sup> seeks to understand how “information technology can be used to defend human rights, improve governance, empower the poor, promote economic development, and pursue a variety of other social goods.” It plans to “evaluate (through experiment and other empirical methods) which technologies and applications are having greatest success, how those successes can be replicated, and how less successful technologies and applications can be improved to deliver real economic, social, and political benefit.”

A project that has human goals at its nominal centre yet focuses on tools and technologies always runs the risk of technological determinism and indeed fetishism. Moreover, the prior history of “toolbox” approaches to political change (albeit before an era when the internet was widespread) enjoins caution over making the discovery and spread of successful technologies the key to achieving improvements in governance, development and human rights.

It may be also that these technology-centred approaches tend to encourage a context-free and amnesiac attitude that ignores the experiences even of the very recent past. In any event, the extraordinary events in the middle east and north Africa fuel the liberation technologists’ euphoria.

## The magic bullet

A doctrine with the same strong technological focus is apparent in the field of “ICT for development” (or “ICT4D”) since the mid-2000s. ICT4D supports the spread of digital technology as a means of delivering <sup>[35]</sup> specific development goals.

The interventions in this field have focused <sup>[36]</sup> on implementing new tools and technologies to address issues of health, governance, gender inequality, rural poverty, and education; projects include providing <sup>[37]</sup> mobile-phone applications to help farmers and fishermen

access market-price information and to encourage income-generation among rural women. Again, there have been successes in these areas, but also considerable obstacles; and these will doubtless affect the internet-freedom agenda and the use of digital technologies and tools for democracy-building <sup>[38]</sup> purposes.

The absence of electrical power and the expense of access <sup>[39]</sup> to the internet and mobile networks are among these obstacles. The Harvard Forum I <sup>[40]</sup> Research ICT Africa demand-side survey estimates that the bottom 75% of mobile-phone users in Africa spend 11%-27% of their household income on mobile communications, far more than the equivalent in developed countries. This is one aspect of a digital divide that mirrors broader structural inequalities in many parts of the developing world, which works to “deepen the vicious circle between inequality and technology diffusion”.

Several experts in the field of ICT4D <sup>[41]</sup> cite the lack of research and the difficulties involved in documenting the specific impacts of new technology. Tim Unwin <sup>[42]</sup>, the Unesco chair in ICT4D, writes <sup>[43]</sup>: “Despite all the rhetoric of success, very few ICT4D activities, especially in Africa, have yet proved to be sustainable.” Dipankar Sinha <sup>[44]</sup> highlights the dangers of “injecting” technology into societies such as India that are marked by “unequal and non-participatory structural relationships”, for this risks becoming a “self-defeating endeavour that would do more harm than good for the developing world.” None of this stops ICT, like the internet’s new tools, being touted as a near-instant magic solution.

## The need for context

The investment of money and empowered enthusiasm in the new technologies will likely guarantee a continuation and increase of programmes aimed at spreading digital technology around the globe. This makes all the more important a detailed assessment of their potential benefits and drawbacks <sup>[45]</sup> in terms of the stated aims of advancing democracy, human rights and economic development.

James Ferguson <sup>[46]</sup>, writing about the failures of many development interventions, argues <sup>[47]</sup> that problems often arise because development agencies implement technical solutions to problems while ignoring the political and structural dimensions which cause those problems.

While researching democracy-promotion programmes in post-Soviet Armenia <sup>[48]</sup>, I found that many of the foreign experts and trainers often possessed very little information about the country, its history, politics and culture, even though their training had aimed at changing its social, cultural and political attitudes, practices, and understandings. There were many inefficiencies and wasted opportunities as a result (see Democracy Building and Civil Society in Post-Soviet Armenia <sup>[49]</sup> (Routledge, 2008).

Sarah Mendelson <sup>[50]</sup> summarises the lesson of much of the experience of the 1990s and 2000s by saying that foreign experts and trainers were good architects in that they knew how to build structures, but poor interior designers because they lacked <sup>[51]</sup> the local knowledge that would provide the content for the structures they had built. This is a profound lesson that many advocates of liberation technology show few signs of learning.

### Sideboxes

#### 'Read On' Sidebox:

Armine Ishkanian <sup>[52]</sup>

Civil Society 2.0 <sup>[21]</sup> / 21st Century Statecraft <sup>[20]</sup>

Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* <sup>[18]</sup> (Public Affairs, 2011)

*Revolution in the Arab World* (Foreign Policy, 2011) <sup>[53]</sup>

Armine Ishkanian, *Democracy Building and Civil Society in Post-Soviet Armenia* <sup>[49]</sup> (Routledge, 2008)

Program on Liberation Technology <sup>[34]</sup>

Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) <sup>[32]</sup>

**Sidebox:**

Armine Ishkanian is a lecturer <sup>[52]</sup> in NGOs and development in the department of social policy, London School of Economic. Her books include *Democracy Building and Civil Society in Post-Soviet Armenia* <sup>[49]</sup> (Routledge, 2008)

Also by Armine Ishkanian in **openDemocracy**:

"Nashi: Russia's youth counter-movement" <sup>[54]</sup> (30 August 2007)

"Democracy contested: Armenia's fifth presidential elections" <sup>[55]</sup> (4 March 2008)

**Related stories:**

The freedom cloud <sup>[56]</sup>

Armenia's mixed messages <sup>[48]</sup>

Digital Bangladesh: virtual dreams, real lives <sup>[57]</sup>

Africa: tools of liberation <sup>[58]</sup>

Nashi: Russia's youth counter-movement <sup>[54]</sup>

Communication: the missing link in sustainable development <sup>[59]</sup>

The internet's future in an aircraft hangar <sup>[60]</sup>

Democracy contested: Armenia's fifth presidential elections <sup>[55]</sup>

What can computers do for the poor? <sup>[61]</sup>

Iran: the double-edged world <sup>[62]</sup>

The Internet is bad for democracy <sup>[63]</sup>

Colombia: networks of dissent and power <sup>[64]</sup>

The darker side of global civil society <sup>[65]</sup>

Dissecting global civil society: values, actors, organisational forms <sup>[66]</sup>

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