

Book Review: To Save Everything Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism

by blog admin

May 1, 2013

Technology, **Evgeny Morozov** proposes, can be a force for improvement – but only if we abandon the idea that it is necessarily revolutionary and instead genuinely interrogate why and how we are using it. **Alison Powell** finds that although the final chapter of this book provides some examples of thoughtful ways that technology could be used as a way of thinking through problems rather than as a panacea, Morozov does not develop his critique much beyond the superficial “it’s not all about the internet.”

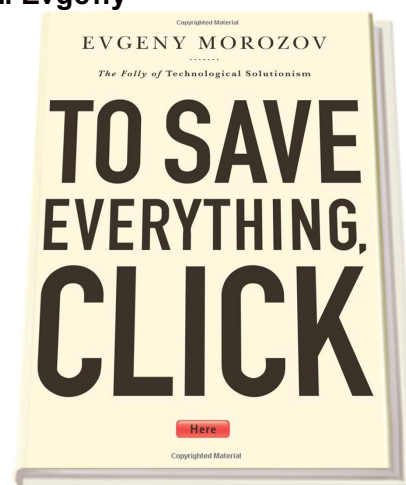


To Save Everything Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism. Evgeny Morozov. Allen Lane. March 2013.

Find this book

Imagine writing a whole book about the internet whose purpose is to discredit people who write books about the internet. Yet this is, at least in part, what [Evgeny Morozov](#) has done with his scathing, inspiring and inconsistent *To Save Everything Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*.

After his first book, the equally scathing *The Net Delusion*, Morozov has carved out a space for himself as a talented book reviewer, and as the tech industry’s most curmudgeonly critic. He’s the digital media equivalent of [Statler and Waldorf](#), the Muppets who heckle from the balcony, but his heckling is about how we have overstated the importance of the internet, and how we are trying desperately to use “liquid politics” “the quantified self” and “gamification” to solve social problems we might not even have.



As a critical digital media scholar I am naturally inclined towards crabbiness and cynicism, and as an avid reader I enjoy a good book review. Morozov’s reviews of over-hyped technology books are refreshing and sometimes brutal. He is a voracious reader and never shirks from exploring the philosophical underpinnings of the books he reviews, revealing inconsistencies and paradoxes that characterize so many arguments about the power of new technology. Yet the no holds barred approach that makes his writing snarkily delicious can also descend into critiques that can be read as attacks on individuals, which enhances Morozov’s reputation as the mud-slinging outsider but which is not so good for balanced criticism. Nor is the zeal with which he tries to mention every book he’s recently read – the early chapters of *To Save Everything* resemble the work of an enthusiastic graduate student hoping to impress his supervisor rather than the second book from a would-be public intellectual.

To Save Everything Click Here uses two linked “small ideas” to critique the belief that the internet will help to improve everything. These two ideas are “internet centrism” and “solutionism”. The former idea is self-evident – advocates of the internet tend to assume that features of the internet can be mapped into other areas, and that its exceptional qualities will transform any area of life that comes to be mediated by it. The latter idea, drawn from science and technology studies and urban planning, argues that focusing on solutions limits our ability to think critically about the nature of the problems they are supposed to solve – or even whether they are ‘problems’ at all! To a hammer, everything looks like a nail, and to a social network entrepreneur, both politics and obesity look like problems that can be solved through behaviour change instigated through social networks.

We can see how internet centrism might operate. Many researchers working in this area have been struck by the way that arguments about the internet’s structure and function have come to stand in for arguments about how we should do politics, how activism happens, and how we should understand our selves, our privacy, and the nature of our relationships with others. Yet this is the weaker of the two arguments in the book. The weakness comes from not actually being able to talk sensibly about what might in fact be different or unique about the Internet, because to do so, even in a critical way would subject Morozov to his own critique. As a result he struggles to represent some of the ways in which the internet’s features do change things. Although the final chapter provides some examples of thoughtful ways that technology could be used as a way of thinking through problems rather than as a panacea, Morozov isn’t able to develop his critique much beyond the superficial “it’s not all about the internet.” Perhaps this is enough, but I can’t help but think that moving beyond critiquing the Silicon Valley paradigm might yield some clearer thinking.

The argument about solutionism is much stronger. Morozov has a good understanding of how STS approaches can help to illustrate the complex relations between social systems, institutions, and technologies. The best chapters look at complex and indeterminate phenomena that are at boundaries of social and technical, like predictive policing that uses “big data” on crime to allocate police resources. Again, though, the problem is the tech industry paradigm that Morozov must write from within, and the power he must accord to technology even in the process of critiquing it. For example, he identifies the perversity of a world in which galvanic skin measurements and other personal data might be algorithmically processed to provide a recommendation for a restaurant or experience. But even in describing how narrow and strange this is, he can’t get past the idea of a knowable self, albeit one who should be known through serendipitous encounters rather than rude external calculations. It seems Morozov’s ideal self is the nineteenth century intellectual, unitary in his critical perspective, gently massaged by the serendipity of walking in Benjamin’s arcades. Luckily more complex theoretical perspectives are to hand, including theories from feminist scholars of science and technology that stress the non-essential nature of the body, subjectivity, and technology. This could take Morozov’s STS beyond the glib friction free perspective of Latour and into a realm where he could more seriously consider power.

But these suggestions should be taken lightly, lest they result in even more manic over-writing rather than thoughtful focus on more complex issues. Morozov is more thoughtful than many of his critics give him credit for, and he does important work there. Unfortunately, too much needs to be excavated by the reader. For a writer of such wonderful book reviews, the book’s review sections are superficial and petty. Meanwhile, a nascent critique peeks through in moments, especially when talking about solutionism.

As an avid reader, I hope Morozov never gives up reviewing books. As a liminal STS scholar, I hope his upcoming PhD studies encourage him to move his long-form writing out of comprehensive exam mode and into the deep analysis that we all need.

Alison Powell is a Lecturer at the Department of Media & Communications at the London School of Economics. Before arriving at the LSE in 2010, Alison was an SSHRC postdoctoral research fellow at the [Oxford Internet Institute](#), where she studied grassroots technology development and digital advocacy and their impact on new media technologies and policies. She has a PhD from Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. [Read more reviews by Alison.](#)