

Are We Ignoring the Dark Side of the Internet? Evgeny Morozov at LSE (Guest blog)

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This report on a lecture at the LSE by Evgeny Morozov is by POLIS intern, Beth Lowell.

From discussions of Iran's "Twitter Revolution" to praise for Google's decision to stop its censorship in China, the Internet is often heralded as a vital tool for democracy. The United States government in particular has long referred to the Internet as a beacon of hope, a great equalizing tool that has the potential to spread democratic practices across the globe by making information available to all. However, in his book *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World*, Evgeny Morozov steps back from the glow of all this Internet hope and optimism to ask: aren't we missing something?

During his LSE public lecture, Morozov opened with a confession: he used to be an Internet optimist too. A native of Belarus, Morozov was initially drawn to Internet idealism but was quickly disheartened when he saw that his work with NGOs and as a blogger was not, in his opinion, making much of a difference.

He partially attributed this lack of momentum to a stagnant class of emerging young technological talent more interested in obtaining grants and working for Western NGOs than continued innovation. He also recognized another contributing factor, one that is rarely referenced in overzealous discussions of Internet democratic glory: governments were also developing online skills.

One of the most problematic Internet idealism traps, according to Morozov, is the misconception that it is always a tool for good. Not all bloggers are dissidents. Not all websites promote equality.

The internet is not a one-way ticket to democracy. Just as activists and democratic societies develop technological skills to advance their goals, so too do undemocratic governments. Morozov cited Iran's 2009 election protests to illuminate this point. Often referred to as the "Twitter Revolution," the Iranian protests garnered international coverage for their use of the Internet to facilitate activism.

Twitter posts, YouTube videos, and mobile phone photos from the events inundated the web. The Internet was hailed as a free platform for those who otherwise didn't have a voice. But, Morozov asked, what about Internet usage in response to these protests?

Morozov reminded the audience that in the wake of the election protests, the Iranian government used the Internet for its own, far from democratic, purposes. The Iranian government transformed new media from a democratic outlet into a means of control by using messages, photos, and videos to collect information on protesters' identities, relationships and interactions.

Speaking afterwards, the chair of the event, Dr. Alison Powell of the LSE Media and Communications department elaborates on Morozov's point saying, "The argument reminds us that technologies are not neutral, value-free tools. They can be adopted to the politics of repressive regimes as easily as they are associated with politics of freedom."

So how do we reconcile our Internet idealism with these harsh realities? Morozov suggests that a new approach to the policy conversation is in order. He proposes that broad, overarching statements about the global Internet are futile and shortsighted. Internet strategy and usage will vary from country to country and policy makers need to prepare for that fact. In the meantime, it seems that even the most ardent Internet idealists should learn to manage their expectations.

This report by POLIS intern, Beth Lowell.

For more information on *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* read POLIS Director Charlie Beckett's [review](#) of the book and event chair Dr. Alison Powell's [review](#).

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