The Net Delusion: Evgeny Morozov

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"If it turns out that the Internet does help to stifle dissent, amplify existing inequalities in terms of access to the media, undermine representative democracy, promote mob mentality, erode privacy, and make us less informed it is not at all obvious how exactly the promotion of so-called Internet freedom is also supposed to assist in the promotion of democracy."

This is the central question in Evgeny Morozov's new book Net Delusion, but the remarkable thing is that the author starts the paragraph with an 'if'. As he goes on to say, it's possible that the Internet does actually foster democracy. In the end, the purpose of this book is not to dismiss the potential of digital technologies to promote human happiness, merely to kill any lingering idealism that this will happen automatically, naturally, or easily.

'Net Delusion' almost reads like a handbook for digital dictators: "How To Use The Internet To Keep Democracy Down". Morozov provides enough evidence of how authoritarians go online to crush dissent to put you off adding a wibbon to your Twitter avatar ever again. [Not that I ever did…]. But he goes beyond that to warn that online activism is essentially weak and that the Internet is the new opiate of the people. It is the pessimist case at length, but argued with a lot more facts and understanding of how the Internet and politics actually works than rhetoricians such as Malcolm Gladwell and Andrew Keen.

To appreciate the book you do have to understand the journey of the author from stubbornly authoritarian post-Communist Belarus to the digital democracy think-tanks of Washington. He feels badly let down by what he calls cyber-optimists, almost all of those he cites are American. He fears that the big digital powers: the State Department, Google, Silicon Valley, etc are getting it wrong. They are playing into the hands of the bad guys by investing too much hope in the power of the Internet which is being used by dictators to track, disarm, and swamp dissent.

So this is not really a book about digital democracy in general. Western Europeans don't get a look in. This is very much a contrast between the big bad authoritarian states (China, Russia, Vietnam, Cuba and Venezuela) and what he sees as the cyber-hypocricy of the US State Department fuelled by a mix of American cyber-idealism and cyber-commercialism.

However, I do think he describes that debate very well and so this is essential reading for anyone interested in the role of the Internet in international relations and the development of governance and democracy. He is right to warn that glib assumptions about the power of the Internet to effect substantial change can actually damage the cause of democracy when they fail.

But here's the funny thing. I wonder if Morozov is something of a cyber-democrat after all. As 'Net Delusion' shows, whether it is for good or evil, the effect of social networks, the future of the infrastructure, the regulation of the Internet and degree of access to digital technologies are all growing in importance in relation to global democracy.

He has written a rather long book that attempts to dismiss false hopes. But in it he also writes persuasively about how what he calls 'cyber-realism' may still bring more democracy. Just because authoritarianism is getting good at using the Internet to sustain itself, does not mean the Internet can't be used to challenge it. As he points out, authoritarianism, like the Internet, is a complex set of issues. It is a 'wicked' problem that can't be solved by simple
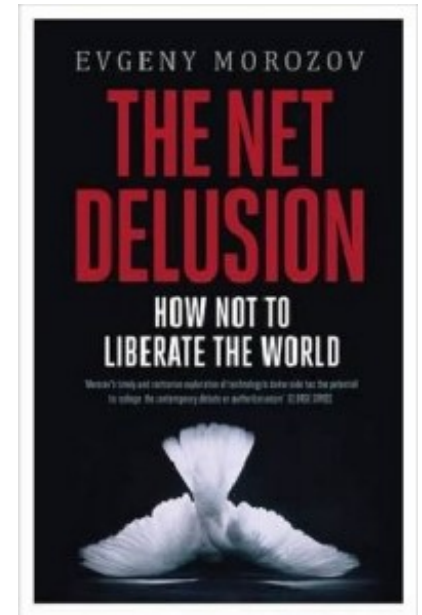
measures. He says that you have to understand the specific circumstances, the social context and the relationship between the mediation and the real world policies. That implies that the Internet can still work for democracy if used well.

I think that digital technologies can make dealing with that kind of 'wicked' problem easier. The Internet allows the sharing of information and public engagement that generally has the potential to facilitate positive political discourse that can force authority in any guise to respond.

The problems Morozov describe in 'Net Delusion' do, I think, help make the case for more networked journalism. I guess I am a cyber optimist when it comes to internet journalism. But I made it very clear in SuperMedia, that saving the world through saving journalism was not inevitable and requires investment and a new approach. Ultimately, politics is about power not iPhones. People need an open, critical and informative news media that is properly networked into democratic structures.

There are plenty of other aspects of the book that I would want to debate with Evgeny, so I am delighted to be chairing a talk with him later this month. But for now, I would recommend this book as a great way to challenge your thinking about democracy and the Internet.