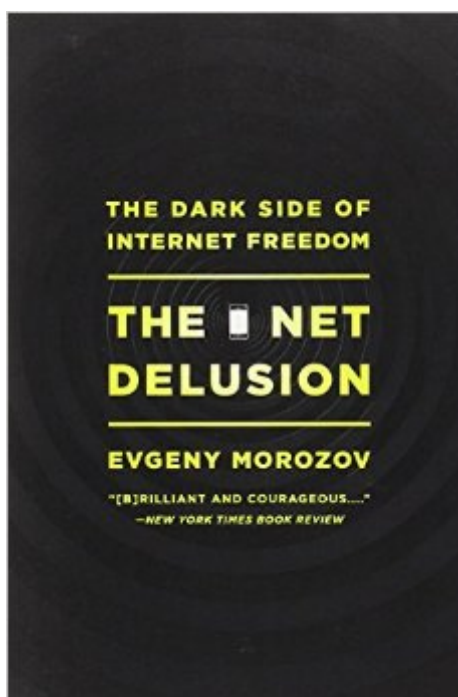


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The Net Delusion: The Dark Side Of Internet Freedom



Synopsis

Updated with a new Afterword • The revolution will be Twittered! • declared journalist Andrew Sullivan after protests erupted in Iran. But as journalist and social commentator Evgeny Morozov argues in *The Net Delusion*, the Internet is a tool that both revolutionaries and authoritarian governments can use. For all of the talk in the West about the power of the Internet to democratize societies, regimes in Iran and China are as stable and repressive as ever. Social media sites have been used there to entrench dictators and threaten dissidents, making it harder • not easier • to promote democracy. Marshalling a compelling set of case studies, *The Net Delusion* shows why the cyber-utopian stance that the Internet is inherently liberating is wrong, and how ambitious and seemingly noble initiatives like the promotion of • Internet freedom • are misguided and, on occasion, harmful.

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Customer Reviews

In *The Net Delusion*, Morozov positions himself the ultimate Net "realist," aiming to bring a dose of realpolitik to discussions about how much of a difference the Net and digital technologies make to advancing democracy and freedom. His depressing answer: Not much. Indeed, Morozov's book is one big wet blanket on the theory that "technologies of freedom" can help liberate humanity from the yoke of repressive government. Morozov clearly relishes his skunk at the garden party role, missing few opportunities to belittle those who subscribe to such theories. If you're one of those who tinted your Twitter avatar green as an expression of solidarity with Iranian "Green Movement" dissidents,

Morozov's view is that, at best, you're wasting your time and, at worst, you're aiding and abetting tyrants by engaging in a form of "slacktivism" that has little hope of advancing real regime change. The portrait he paints of technology and democracy is a dismal one in which cyber-utopian ideals of information as liberator are not just rejected but inverted. He regards such "cyber-utopian" dreams as counter-productive, even dangerous, to the advance of democracy and human freedom. Much of the scorn he heaps on the cyber-utopians is well-deserved, although I think there are far fewer of them around than Morozov imagines. Nonetheless, there certainly is a bit too much Pollyanna-ish hyper-optimism at play in debates about the Net's role in advancing liberation of those peoples who are being subjected to tyrannical rule across the planet. But Morozov simply doesn't know when to quit. His relentless and highly repetitive critique goes well overboard. We can all agree that technology is just one of many tools that can be harnessed to keep the power of the State in check or advance important civic / charitable causes; other factors and forces play an even more important role in promoting democracy and, in particular, ending tyranny. Yet, in his zeal to counter those who have placed too great an emphasis on the role of information technology, Morozov himself has gone too far in the opposite extreme in *The Net Delusion* by suggesting that technology's role in transforming States or politics is either mostly irrelevant or even, at times, counter-productive. The more profound problem with Morozov's thesis is that, if he is correct that the Net poses such risks, or undermines the cause of democracy-promotion, isn't the logical recommendation that flows from it technology control or entertainment repression? He never really makes it clear how far he'd go to put the information genie back in the bottle since he simply refuses to be nailed down on specifics in the book. But his tone throughout the book -- speaking of the Net as "a great danger," and "a threat" with many "negative side effects" -- seems to suggest that some form of technological control or information repression may be necessary. Morozov is on somewhat stronger footing in highlighting the paradoxical danger of voluntary information exposure in an age of ubiquitous digital connectivity and communications. But let's say it is true that social networking tools and other digital technologies which allow greater online personalization and socialization also potentially facilitate increased government surveillance by the State. What are we to do about that? Again, he doesn't really say. He also scores some points for rightly pointing to the hypocrisy at play in the United States today -- by both government and corporations -- "when it comes to the promotion of Net freedom globally. American leaders in both government and business need to better align their actions with their rhetoric when it comes to the interaction of government and technology. Too often, both groups are guilty of talking a big game about the Internet and freedom, only to later take steps to undermine that cause. But, strangely, he continues on to suggest that we should simply get used

to the increasing politicization of the Net, even though it's unclear how that would help his cause. To summarize, Morozov is quite right about the excessive euphoria currently surrounding the relationship of the Net to politics and regime change, but I think he's gone a bit overboard in *The Net Delusion*. [My complete review of Morozov's "Net Delusion" can be found on the Technology Liberation Front Blog]

The Net Delusion by Evgeny Morozov is an instant-classic in the field of technology studies that will be of interest to both serious scholars of the global Internet and those interested in making sense of the widespread excitement about using technology for advancing goals such as individual freedom. Morozov's starting point is the belief, promoted by everyone from world leaders to prominent bloggers, that the Internet is an emancipatory agent. Millions of dollars have been spent guided by the belief that if unfettered Internet access is made available globally, especially in repressive countries, democracy will prevail because citizens will be empowered to speak freely, coordinate politically, etc. Morozov convincingly argues that the truth is far more nuanced and difficult. Although much of the rhetoric and policy in this area comes from the belief that technology has been an essential tool in promoting individual freedom throughout history, most notably being arguments about samizdat's role in ending the Cold War, Morozov provides a very readable explanation of how this metaphorical thinking is misguided. Instead, he argues that the Internet is subject to the power of the state and therefore is largely impotent as a mechanism for promoting democracy. He shows that throughout the world, the Internet is a) more likely to be used for entertainment purposes, b) censored in ways that are not easily surmountable, c) used as a tool for propaganda by both governments and individuals that are not pro-West, and d) used for spying on dissidents. *The Net Delusion* is thoroughly entertaining throughout, but that doesn't stop it from digging into some very serious subjects. The final chapters provide an excellent explanation of the history and philosophy of technology - tough subjects that are rarely considered, least of all in such an approachable manner. Finally, Morozov closes with what he calls a cyber-realist manifesto to guide thinking going forward. There are certainly bits to quibble with throughout the book, but overall, it is an excellent work and highly recommended.

Social studies scholar Evgeny Morozov may occasionally be cranky and stylistically conflicted, but his original arguments provide refreshing insights. He debunks nearly religious beliefs about the intrinsically positive power of the Internet and total information access. Morozov demonstrates how propagating this optimistic view of the web drowns out more subtle positions and keeps

governmental and societal attention focused on less meaningful activities. getAbstract recommends this worthy polemic to those engaged in cyberculture, those trying to decipher cultural change, and those dedicated to understanding and promoting freer societies.

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