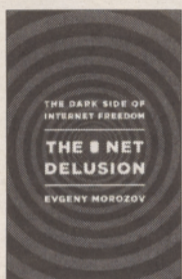


Twitter's bitter aftertaste

How cutting-edge technologies, past and present, have shaped our political landscape, for better or worse

BY JOE MARTIN
GUEST WRITER



The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom
By Evgeny Morozov,
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Science and technology contribute to an ever-widening array of devices and gadgets that seep into society's fabric at a vertiginous rate. Innovative machinery and applications pour profusely from a technological horn of plenty with waves of new items and systems constantly overtaking the previous hodgepodge of digital doodads that many are not yet used to. We are dazzled by the things we can do with our personal computers, cell phones and other shiny contraptions of our digital times. There are those who gush that we must surely be on the cusp of a new age of liberating possibilities.

Not so fast, says Evgeny Morozov, in his provocative survey of cutting edge communication technologies and their social and political implications. There is an underside to the hype and hoopla that is reckless to ignore. "Utopian accounts of technology's liberating role in human history rarely acknowledge the fact that it was the discovery of quinine, which helped to fight malaria, reducing the risk of endemic tropical disease, that eliminated one major barrier to colonialism, or that the invention of printing helped to forge a common Spanish identity and pushed the Spaniards to colonize Latin America."

The first modern technology to inspire visions of a unified humanity sharing a global village was the telegraph. It turned out to be a nifty tool for imperialist designs. The arrival of the airplane moved some to predict that following the end of World War I, a "new period of human relations" was about to dawn because air flight would shrink our world and promote understanding and peace between nations.

Radio became the next wonder to ignite the imagination. The brilliant inventor Marconi was moved to speculate that "the coming of the wireless era will make war impossible, because it will make war ridiculous." Then there was the excitement

of television that some pundits averred was certain to bring "teledemocracy" to the masses.

A more sober assessment of television's impact was provided by science fiction writer Ray Bradbury: "The television is that insidious beast, that Medusa which freezes a billion people to stone every night, staring fixedly, that Siren which called and sang and promised so much and gave, after all, so little." Morozov states: "Technologies, it seems, tend to overpromise and under-deliver, at least on their initial promises."

Morozov examines Iran's 2009 "Green Revolution." In the wake of the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, streets exploded in outrage. Accusations of fraud sparked widespread protests. These displays were hailed as "The Twitter Revolution" due to the broad utilization of novel devices and systems like Twitter, Facebook and email that enabled Iranians to harness and coordinate the political passion shared by frustrated citizens.

Numerous western journalists and pundits like Andrew Sullivan were pontificating about the democratic boon cutting edge technologies will bring to those suffering under authoritarian regimes. Technophiles assert cybertopia's evolving and tantalizing technologies are inevitably democratic in their application. Morozov provides a timely cautionary argument that is a refreshing counterpoint to shallow techno-triumphalism too frequently offered as profound analysis.

At the height of the Green-Twitter Revolution, Morozov notes a senior official with the U.S. State Department sent Twitter executives an email containing a request to postpone planned maintenance of the Twitter site so not to hinder the mobilization of Iran's angry citizens. The New York Times stated this email was "recognition by the United States government that an Internet blogging

service that did not exist four years ago has the potential to change history in an ancient Islamic country."

However, drastic change never came. Eventually protests stopped. In fact Ahmedinejad's government quickly cracked down on its opponents, often taking the very technologies celebrated as harbingers of liberation and using them to trace, catch and imprison people. Other nations like China observed events in Iran and proactively imposed stricter controls on potentially disruptive media. Morozov argues that instead of waves of democracy toppling uptight and despotic regimes we got "globalization at its worst."

As I finished Morozov's book, I pondered recent events in Egypt and how communication technologies contributed to the political resistance resulting in the abdication of longtime president Hosni Mubarak. Whether Mubarak's departure will usher in an era of genuine democracy in that country remains to be seen.

And I thought of the horrific experience endured by "60 Minutes" reporter Lara Logan, who was brutalized and gang raped in Cairo's Tahrir Square while reporting on the frenzied celebrations on the night of Feb. 11. Torn away from her film crew, interpreter and bodyguard, Logan was stripped of her clothing and nearly killed in the course of the assault. She said, "When my clothes gave way, I remember looking up and seeing them taking pictures with their cell phones, the flashes of their cell phone cameras."

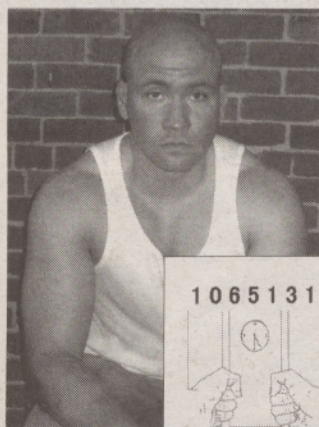
A woman beaten, dazed and violated while men surrounding her with sophisticated cell phones record the event. There is no democracy and surely no liberation in that horrifying image.

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REUTERS/RAHEB HOMAVANDI

Customers use computers at an internet cafe in Tehran May 9, 2011. Web sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and countless others were banned shortly after the re-election of Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the huge street protests that followed.



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Jason Breedlove

I chose to advertise in Street Roots because I know its readers believe in helping people who are trying to help themselves. I've spent a number of years abusing meth and alcohol.

I've spent half of the last 17 years clean/sober and most of it was spent inside a correctional facility in Iowa. I've written a book about my experiences. "1065131" by Jason Breedlove is available at Powell's, Reading Frenzy and on Kindle.

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