Title
Book Review: Evgeny Morozov: To Save Everything, Click Here.

Permalink
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Publication Date
2014

To Save Everything, Click Here – The Folly of Technological Solutionism by Evgeny Morozov. New York: PublicAffairs, 2013. 432 pp. ISBN 978-1-61039-138-2.

"The Cloud" is one of the silliest buzzwords currently bouncing around in the tech world. Clouds are vaporous, almost intangible. The servers, submarine cables, voltage-bits and hard drives that the so-called Cloud consists of, are anything but. "The Cloud" is the epitome of representational illusions created by the tech world to make technology seem like more than it actually is. This kind of technological abstraction is the over-arching matter of concern in Evgeny Morozov's *To Save Everything, Click Here.* Morozov's main critique is of what he dubs 'Solutionism', the techno-deterministic, almost technocratic idea that technology is the answer to any challenge we face.

Methodically, he targets vocal technology writers and thinkers, pointing out the flaws in their technocentricity. His main adversaries seem to be Clay Shirky and Kevin Kelly, both of whom are –sometimes a little too polemically – lambasted with equal amounts of academic prowess and the classic Morozovian snark.

A main theme in *To Save Everything…* is the notion of "The Internet" (p. 17). Morozov applies scare quotes in order to signal the sociocultural meaning of the term, rather than it simply being a reference to a global information network. He effectively demonstrates how "The Internet" has become a catch-all phrase for almost any technological development seen as beneficial to the human race, which almost makes it bulletproof: If it doesn't work, it's because it goes against the rules (the will?) of "The Internet".

Morozov extracts the concept of "Internet-centrism" from this rather isolationist, first-world view of recent technological developments. Internet-centric writers such as Shirky tend to miss the big picture, argues Morozov. Writing about Shirky's veneration for Ronald Coase's theory of the firm, he objects (in what resembles post-colonial critique) that "…here's the problem: Thinking of a Californian start-up in terms of transaction costs is much easier than pulling the same trick for, say, the Iranian society" (p. 43).

This kind of contextualization is exactly what separates Evgeny Morozov from the pack of more grumpy, curmudgeony Internet and tech critics such as Andrew Keen or Nicholas Carr. Morozov doesn't deny the effectiveness of current technologies or the rising prevalence of networked structures in everything from organizations to scientific methodology. His objection is against the school of thought promoting these relatively recent developments as the *only* solutions to any challenge we might face, or as the *only* lens through which to see things. He even spends the last chapter of the book arguing for the notion that it isn't the tech that is the problem, but rather, its users.

Morozov is best when he focuses on things directly affected by Internet-centrism, such as truth-production. In what is something of a meta-narrative, Morozov critiques the type of truth-production that is the result of looking at the world through the eyes of a Silicon Valley engineer. He shows how political truths have been hijacked by Internet-centrism by allowing sites such as PolitiFact.com and FactCheck.org to present themselves as the only purveyors of the truth in the political sphere (p.119). From another angle, Morozov also sharply dissects the slightly logical-positivist quest for data-as-truth represented by the Quantified Self movement and the reliance on algorithmically produced 'truthful' guidelines for decision-making. In an especially well-executed attack on Kevin Kelly, he exposes what he sees as classic Silicon Valley mentality as being reductionist to a fault. He begins by quoting Kelly for writing that "Meaningfulness is very hard to measure, which makes it very hard to optimize. So far anything we can quantify has been getting better over the long term" and then points out how nonsensical this is, considering income inequality, carbon emissions or obesity rates. But the main point comes a few sentences later: "…proclamation like Kelly's also tap into the long-running scientific tradition…that celebrates measurement as seemingly objective and consensus-boosting". (P. 245) Morozov goes further by showing how Kelly is really just echoing historical figures such as Lord Kelvin and the Marquis de Condorcet. Channeling Bruno Latour, Morozov pokes fun at the naïveté of Kelly and his Silicon Valley co-conspirators, and their semi-religious belief in "The Internet", data and tech as the only means to the production of truth. And rightly so. He also refuses to accept the proposed inevitability of Internet-centricity, calling for an end to "Technological Defeatism" and showing how e.g. regulatory efforts have been effective in curtailing the less beneficial sides of technological evolution through the centuries. (p. 213)

Where Morozov gets onto thin ice is when he attempts to generalize Internet-centrism. He spends an entire chapter arguing for the fact that the Internet-centrists are trying to kill political processes by implementing technologies that can make democracy more direct. Morozov is right in pointing out that democracy inherently is messy – that's probably why it's the only viable form of government – but he gives far too much credit to the power of technocrats in that sense. He ignores, for example, that large campaign and PAC contributions under Citizens United is far more problematic than the technology that makes it easier to donate. His foray into crime suffers from the same problem. Attempting a coherent critique of predictive policing, he ends up discussing crime prevention strategies more generally, and the relevance of the discussion to his point about Solutionism disappears into the distance. His tendency to place Internet-centrism and Solutionism almost solely within Silicon Valley is also somewhat flawed. Certainly, there is a vast amount of solutionists and internet-centrists there, but

it's not like that same mentality can't be found in Bangalore, Boston or Beijing. And with Stanford being the main academic center of Silicon Valley, with UC Berkeley nearby, it can be argued that what Morozov sees as a consensus is actually more of a sociocultural tug-of-war. It can also be argued that even though Morozov's skepticism towards the decentralizing nature of networked societal elements (and the very vocal proponents of same) has some merit, he is up against the theories of major scholars like Manuel Castells, Barry Wellman, Rob Cross and even Bruno Latour, who he so venerably refers to many other places in the book. To this end, Morozov chooses to pummel the little guy instead by attacking the people with more exaggerated views on the end of hierarchies, such as the early Lawrence Lessig or Anonymous. It would have served his argument well to bring in the more balanced view of these scholars to nuance his argument.

Sometimes, Morozov also goes a little off the rails in his subject choices. His criticism of Gordon Bell's extreme life-logging escapades, as recorded in his book *Total Recall* at one point goes into a discussion of Proust, just because Bell has the audacity to use the term "Proustian" (p. 276) in a way that really doesn't have a lot to do with Proust the thinker. These excursions are somewhat space-wasting, which is a shame considering the relevance that is otherwise densely woven into the pages of *To Save Everything...*

The net result of Morozov's efforts, however, is very much a benefit to the discourse on abstractional conceptualizations of technology. In contrast to more obstructionist tech pundits, Morozov actually presents alternatives to the solutionist positions he puts on display in the book. In general, these solutions center around awareness of context, pitting skepticism against positivism and looking out for solutions that requires a problem rather than the other way around. In *To Save Everything, Click Here.* one can find many oft-heard critiques of our connected, tech-mediated contemporary society. But it's rare that they are answered and perspectivized this well in what is really more of a debate book than a scientific one.

Reviewer

Morten Bay is a second-year Ph.D. student in Information Studies at UCLA. His main focus is the Internet and other information network structures and their role in society. He also works as a journalist and has written four books published in his native Denmark of which two, *Generation Netvaerk* and *Homo Conexus,* are about Network Society issues. His fifth book, *Welcome to Computopia,* is scheduled for publication in May 2014.