The Net Delusion

What Comes After Internet Utopia?

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The Background

My perspective: shaped by NGO/philanthropy experience

2005-2006 excitement about “blogs” = today's excitement about “social media”

Got frustrated with uncritical and naïve embrace of “technological fixes” by policy-makers
THE NET DELUSION

HOW NOT TO LIBERATE THE WORLD

‘Evgeny Morozov offers a rare note of wisdom and common sense, on an issue overwhelmed by digital utopians’
MALCOLM GLADWELL
What does it mean to be “critical” of the Net?

* It's NOT to dismiss it as unimportant, unnecessary or uninteresting (≠SKEPTICISM)

* It's NOT to deny that the Net can enhance democracy, undermine authoritarianism, etc (≠NAYSAYING)

* It's NOT to suggest that bad guys (dictators, NSA, Microsoft) will always win (≠PESSIMISM)
Instead we need to...

- Reject claims of the Net's "inherent logic"

- Avoid "is-ism" mentality

- Recognize that preserving the liberating potential of the Net will be hard work
Why is it so hard to account for the Internet's "dark" side?
Technology & Social Change

Instrumentalist vs Ecological Perspectives on the Arab Spring
Instrumentalist Perspective

- The Internet is just a neutral tool, an instrument, an amplifier
  - It can be used for both good and bad
    - It's all about how people use it
- If the Internet weren't available, protesters would have used some other tool
  - The Net's role is most interesting during/right before protest
“Social media’s role [in the Arab Spring] is maybe a bit overblown. If people want change, then they will find a way to get that change. Whatever technology they may or may not have used was neither a necessary nor sufficient case for getting to the outcome that they got to, but having people who wanted change was. I don’t pretend that [if] Facebook didn’t exist, that this wouldn’t even be possible. Of course it would have”

Mark Zuckerberg on Charlie Rose, Nov 7, 2011
“People protested and brought down governments before Facebook was invented... People with a grievance will always find ways to communicate with each other. How they choose to do it is less interesting, in the end, than why they were driven to do it in the first place.”

Malcolm Gladwell, “Does Egypt Need Twitter?”, New Yorker's News Desk blog
"Because the cost of sharing and coordinating has collapsed, new methods of organization are available to ordinary citizens, methods that allow events to be arranged without much advance planning."

Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, 2008
The Net is more than a tool; it transforms both the environment where politics is made, and those who participate in politics → GOOD AT DETECTING STRUCTURAL CHANGES

- In authoritarian regimes, the Internet may be creating a new, digital, networked public sphere

- The Internet's most interesting impact is not during protest but before & after it
“...What I didn't do a good enough job of assessing [in *Here Comes Everybody*] is that ...the ability to turn people out on the street is the end of a long process rather than a shortcut...Countries where this kind of turnout worked best was where there had been years of conversation in advance among people who were politically like-minded enough to agree on a strategy.“

Clay Shirky, interview with Anneberg Digital News, Nov 2011
“... the strongest case for the fundamentally transformative effects of the new media may lie in the general emergence of a public sphere capable of eroding the ability of states to monopolize information and argument,... of facilitating new networks across society...The question of whether that authoritarian state can adapt to this challenge...should shape our research agenda in the coming years”

Marc Lynch, “The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State
I. Authoritarian regimes

- Utility of social media depends on the political cycle
- Emergencies/revolutions aren't representative events
- If current business and political trends continue, the Net will be less useful to dissidents, more useful to dictators
1. Smart dictators will use the Net to suppress some of the Net's *emancipatory* capabilities WHILE developing new, *repressive* capabilities.

2. Whether they succeed depends on many factors, many of them independent of technology.

3. The task is to understand their game plan.
Dictators' Adaptation Strategies

1. New Forms of Online Harassment
2. Propaganda
3. Surveillance
4. Control of online resources
5. Use of tech to outsmart the protesters
6. Post-protest clean-up with emerging tech
New forms of Harassment

- Delegating Censorship to Private Companies

- Bypassing the Dictator's Dilemma: From Filtering to Customized Censorship

- Cyber-attacks: Tomaar
New Forms of Propaganda

- China's 50-cent army
- Russia's “Spinternet” initiatives
- Active use of Twitter by pro-government forces in Syria and Bahrain
New forms of Surveillance

- Spying on activists with Western technology
- Mobile tracking
- Data-mining + social graph analysis
Control of Online Resources

- Russia/China vs Egypt/Tunisia: platform control
- Iran's “halal” internet
- Pressure on BlackBerry (and now others) to keep servers in the country
Outsmarting protesters

- Flashmobs in Belarus
- Fake protests in Sudan
- Facebook pressure in Zimbabwe
Post-protest “clean up”

- Facial recognition technology
- Voice analysis
- Identification of who was in the protest zone through mobile phones
The real Internet Freedom Agenda

• To thwart these adaptation strategies, we'll need to ask a lot of tough questions about
  • - how Silicon Valley should run its affairs
  • - how to regulate exports of technology to repressive regimes + investments in the industry by our own govts
  • - how far Western law enforcement agencies want to go in terms of online surveillance
Dystopian future?

- The Net is NOT inherently liberating; its liberating potential may shrink or grow depending on the circumstances.

- Key Q: will the Net be MORE or LESS conducive to dissent in 5 years?

- If LESS: how can we prevent that from happening?
Thank you!

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