

Technological Fixes

TO SAVE EVERYTHING, CLICK HERE:

THE FOLLY OF TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTIONISM

REVIEWED BY **EVAN SELINGER**

TECHNOLOGICAL OPTIMISM IS SILICON Valley's most pervasive export. As indicated by recent remarks from Google's senior vice president and chief financial officer, Patrick Pichette, this rosy outlook is guided by the conviction that the world is broken but can be fixed if we use technology to save us from ourselves. Emphasizing the success of projects such as Google's self-driving car, Pichette envisions a future without auto accidents and traffic jams, when human fallibility—our flawed judgment, inefficient behavior, and propensity to make mistakes—is kept in check.

Evgeny Morozov pushes back against this techno-fix ideology. While *To Save Everything, Click Here* is a difficult read—filled with references to diverse theorists and thick with case studies—it also provides an exemplary



By Evgeny Morozov

PublicAffairs

415 pp. \$28.99

philosophy of technology. Morozov challenges widespread claims that life will improve dramatically once technology makes more decisions for us, makes it easier to track and analyze behavior, dismantles long-standing hierarchies, and erodes barriers to the flow of communication.

This is not to say that he is against progress. Furthermore, unlike many who engage in humanistic critiques of technology, Morozov, a *New Republic* contributing editor, displays a thorough grasp of the complexities that structure debates about policy, markets, and governance. In his previous book, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (2011), he challenged “cyber-utopianism,” the “naïve belief in the

emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downside.” The ideology gives rise to “Internet-centrism,” which depicts the current era as a revolutionary time in which “everything is undergoing profound change.”

In his new book, he continues to take to task people such as the young Cairo-born Google executive Wael Ghonim, who saw the Arab Spring as a watershed moment in history, the product of a leaderless movement that, as Morozov puts it, supposedly demon-

strated the “superiority of decentralized and horizontal networks” as protesters communicated via social media. After Hosni Mubarak abdicated, Morozov points out, organizational challenges and hierarchical conflicts challenged this Revolution 2.0 model.

And he adds “solutionism” to the list of mistakes that mar discussions about the role of technology in political reform, crime reduction, privacy, and behavior modification. Solutionism—a term Morozov draws from urban planning and architecture studies—results when



KHALED DESOUKI / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

In Cairo's Tahrir Square in February 2011, a man joins protestors calling for the ouster of Hosni Mubarak's long-term regime, while holding a sign praising Facebook. Voices once crediting social media's role in the revolution have grown quieter since.

someone (1) invents a problem, (2) misrepresents this fiction as a genuine and urgent dilemma, and (3) advocates using technology to fix it.

We continue to expect technology to deliver us from the imperfections of the human condition, though history doesn't support that idea.

Consider one of Morozov's examples: In the pages of this very magazine ["A Small World After All?" Spring 2012], Ethan Zuckerman, director of the MIT Center for Civic Media, proposed modifying Facebook to connect people in the developed world with those in developing nations. This could happen, he said, if Facebook were to recommend strangers from far away with whom users might have a friendly chat. In Morozov's mind, Zuckerman's first mistake was to frame the general public's limited interest in global affairs as a communication problem that could be solved with technology. In so doing, Zuckerman ignored people's complex social, cultural, political, and psychological

reasons for limiting their circle of empathy and, frankly, sometimes even indulging in xenophobia. At its core, Morozov worries, the proposal presumes that previous generations were inferior, imprisoned by biases they wished to shed but were forced to bear due to technological constraints.

Tinkering with the Internet won't address many of the root causes of provincialism, Morozov insists, and pretending that it will lends authority to other misguided claims. For example, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg has proclaimed that animosity in the Middle East persists because of a lack of connectedness, not deep hatreds. This self-serving notion implies that if everyone had a Facebook account, Morozov writes, "all wars would stop."

Overcoming solutionism isn't easy. The outlook is evident throughout history, dating back to ancient Greece, when Plato defended the primacy of using mathematical reasoning to organize an ideal city. Morozov predicts that new versions of solutionism will emerge long after the technologies we're familiar with become outdated. He's right. We continue to expect technology to deliver us from the imperfections of the human condition, though history doesn't support that idea.

Despite the merits of his argument, *To Save Everything, Click Here* is sometimes a bitter pill to swallow. To make his critique, Morozov portrays key boosters in the public debates about the role of technology, such as Jeff Jarvis and Clay Shirky, as opportunistic peddlers of bombast. He's also very selective about the material he presents to bolster his arguments, but right now the marketplace of ideas is so imbalanced in favor of idealistic conceptions of technology that Morozov should not be blamed too

much for using all the ammunition at his disposal. In a climate of excessive technological optimism, Morozov's book offers a timely consideration of the consequences of investing resources—not just material ones, but also our hopes and dreams—in projects that offer impossible redemption. ■

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