Did Trotsky Tweet?

The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom, Evgeny Morozov, PublicAffairs, 408 pages

By Leon Hadar | April 5, 2011

Published just a month before Egyptian ruler Hosni Mubarak was deposed in an Internet-boosted revolt, *The Net Delusion* might seem a singularly untimely book. But for that reason, it is all the more provocative. Its author, Belarus-born American scholar Evgeny Morozov, set out to challenge the conventional wisdom about the Internet: the notion that social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are becoming agents of political change and can help topple authoritarian regimes in countries like, say, Egypt.

Not so, argues Morozov, who is skeptical that cyberspace is conducive to democracy and liberty. He dumps into the recycle bin the Friedmanite axiom—Tom, that is, not Milton—that no government will be able to crush the Internet's libertarian spirit, an idea first enunciated by John Perry Barlow in his famous "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" in 1996. Morozov criticizes the belief that free access to information, combined with new tools of mobilization afforded by blogs and social networks, will lead to the opening of authoritarian societies and their eventual democratization. He slams that notion as a form of "techno-utopianism" or "cyber-utopianism." The oppressed masses in authoritarian states are not going to mount the barricades once they get unfettered access to Wikipedia and Twitter, he cautions.

In fact, Morozov insists that the Web can and does help autocrats like, say, Hosni Mubarak cling to power, with dictators using it not just to track down dissidents but also to dispense propaganda. Morozov points out that after noticing that Facebook had been used to publicize anti-government protests in 2008, "Egyptian authoritarians decided to embrace it as well," with more than 50 Facebook groups springing up online to nominate Gamal Mubarak as the successor to his father.

Morozov finished writing his book in the aftermath of last year's successful suppression in Tehran of the Green Movement protesting the rigged re-election of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Indeed, he focuses on the role played by Twitter and other social-networking services in the emergence of the Green Movement—and the coverage of what turned out to be the Iranian non-revolution—as a case study that proves his thesis: the Web doesn't unleash political change, people do.

Anyone who followed American coverage of the events in Iran will recall the importance that reporters attributed to the social-networking site Twitter in advancing the agenda of the Green Movement. In fact, many pundits hailed the uprising in Iran as a Revolution." Buying into the notion that the Twitter is a liberating force, the State Department and members of Congress asked Twitter to delay scheduled maintenance to avoid disrupting communications among the Iranian protesters.

But noting that only about 60 residents had active Twitter accounts in Tehran during the protests, Morozov suggests that while the social-networking site played a part in mobilizing tech-savvy Iranians in the West and assisting them in publicizing the anti-regime protests, it probably had very limited impact on the evolution of the Green Movement inside Iran. The revolutionary change necessary to oust powerful authoritarian regimes requires a high level of centralization among opposition groups. But the decentralized nature of the Internet may have helped split the movement into competing debate chambers. As Morozov puts it, the Green Movement may have drowned in its own tweets.

Ironically, the American media's celebration of the Twitter Revolution and the State Department's pressure on the company provoked the Iranian security services to crack down on Twitter and other social networks, while the information the Iranian regime was able to gather by browsing Facebook helped it to identify anti-government activists and arrest them—just the opposite of what Internet enthusiasts in Washington had hoped to achieve. The Iranian government not only succeeded in thwarting Internet communications, it also bombarded Iranian websites with its own propaganda—or "Spinternet," as Morozov calls it—aimed at provoking the general public against the demonstrators and dividing the opposition. This online strategy has also been pursued by authoritarian regimes in China and Venezuela.

I experienced cognitive dissonance of a sort after finishing Morozov's book in one sitting—it is so interesting and so well written that I couldn't put it down—and then browsing the Web and discovering that Mubarak was ousted. Since then the American media has been celebrating the events in Egypt as the "Facebook Revolution" or the "Downloaded Uprising" and providing us with a narrative that seems to counter the one outlined by Morozov in *The Net Delusion*. Delusion? Not according to reports I've been reading in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* or the coverage I've been watching on CNN and Al Jazeera, all of which have created the impression that a bunch of young, cool, and very Internet-savvy Egyptians succeeded in using social media to mobilize hundreds of thousands of their countrymen. They protested against Mubarak by blogging, tweeting, Facebooking, YouTubing, and Googling their way to Cairo's Tahrir Square—and straight to freedom, liberty, and democracy.

Returning from Tunisia—"where Facebook gave young protesters the connective muscle to oust an Arab dictator, and as I watch on YouTube images of brave young Egyptians confronting the clubs and water-cannons of President Hosni Mubarak's goons"—the *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen blasted Morozov's cyberskepticism as "dead wrong." The freedom to connect is "a tool of liberation," he argued, insisting that "Organization, networking, exposure to suppressed ideas and information, the habits of debate and self-empowerment in a culture of humiliation and conspiracy: These are some of the gifts social media is bestowing on overwhelmingly young populations across the Arab world."

Hence, if you buy the arguments made by Cohen and the majority of pundits in Washington, you must dismiss Morozov and the skepticism of other anti-cyberutopians, including Malcolm Gladwell, author of a much discussed *New Yorker* article, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted." The Egyptian Revolution *was* tweeted. Or was it?