

Editor's note - the next edition of *MERJ* will be a guest edited, themed collection titled 'Media Studies 2.0 – a retrospective'. So it was interesting to note that in his recent passionate *attack* on the idea in *3D* (the journal of MECCSA), *MERJ* editorial board member Dan Laughey states: 'to all MS 2.0 malteser-munchers I recommend Evgeny Morozov's *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* (2011) – an excellent attempt to dig beneath the hype and expose the impotence of Internet "slacktivism"'. This provides some extra context and flavour to these comparative book reviews from Steve Dixon:

The Net Delusion; How Not to Liberate the World

Eugeny Morozov

(London: Allen Lane, 2011)

Alternative and Activist New Media

Leah Lievrouw

(London: Polity, 2011)

I was recently asked to join a Facebook group called 'Click here to help stop the crackdown in Libya'. I am usually quite reticent in joining Facebook groups, and, perhaps in part due to the laziness of the group's title, swiftly declined to join this one. However, over 450,000 people didn't share my reticence – for them, it seems, political engagement is now merely a click away. Only a year ago Hillary Clinton was drawing parallels between the Iron Curtain of the Cold War and the 'information curtain descending across much of the world', and how web 2.0 tools will be used 'to advance democracy and human rights'. Gordon Brown claimed that social media would prevent another Rwanda, and, on the so-called 'Green' (or Twitter) revolution in Iran: 'people are using new technology to come together in new ways to make their views known.' Mark Pfeifle, former security advisor to the Bush administration, went so far as to nominate Twitter for the Nobel Peace Prize (*Wired* magazine had already beaten him to it by nominating the entire internet).

Eugeny Morozov's *The Net Delusion; How Not to Liberate the World* seeks to debunk much of the hyperbole and grandiose claims on the political power of the internet, and in particular how Facebook and Twitter are bringing about real political change. Morozov argues that internet freedom is an illusion, and that technology has not only failed to protect people's rights, but is in fact being used against them by authoritarian regimes, through censorship, surveillance, propaganda, and the stifling of dissent. Arguing that this 'cyber-utopian' view is both naïve and a "mis-reading of history", and drawing on a range

of international examples and case studies, Morozov gives an impassioned critique of political forms of technological determinism, whilst simultaneously attempting to advocate a more reasoned 'cyber-realistic' approach.

The focus of much of Morozov's ire is the mainstream media's pre-occupation with the so-called 'Twitter revolution' after the 2009 Iranian elections (also recently debunked in Sreberny's and Khiabany's *Blogistan*), citing compelling statistics and interviews with dissidents to support his argument. But Morozov is keen to show how the internet can just as easily be used to control, as it can be a tool for education or communication. China, Vietnam, Chile, Russia, Venezuela Turkey, Belarus and Cuba are all mentioned as states that use social media in the very ways that are eulogised by proponents of 'The Google Doctrine', be it Hugo Chavez tweeting from his Blackberry or China's use of 'spinternet' (his term) by 'red-texting' direct to people's mobile phones. He severely criticises what he considers to be the unthinking Western promotion of social media and the mistaken belief that the spread of the internet promotes democracy and freedom. Cyber-utopian idealism, he argues is a simplistic understanding of much more complex arguments, as seen in the Chinese and Iranian use of (US supplied) software, for e-mail tracking and face-recognition, for example. Furthermore, use of social media by dissidents still provides a revealing and trackable stream of social data for authoritarian governments to use. Rather than being seen as promoting democracy, Morozov sees social media as natural tools for dictators.

At worst, this can manifest itself in delusional western foreign policy. The US 'Politics 2.0' ideal, for example, is seen as at best mis-placed (asking Twitter to re-schedule an upgrade so as not to interrupt the Iranian protests) and at worst as a form of commercially driven cyber-hypocrisy (Morozov rightly argues that the American political elite "can't be calling for imposing restrictions on sites like WikiLeaks" while "disparaging China and Iran for similar impulses"). The cyber-utopian ideal, Morozov argues, also misunderstands people. Drawing parallels with East German government policy in the 1960s and 1970s, he cites evidence showing that those from oppressive regimes that are given fast access to unfettered information will not necessarily strive for freedom or open a Blogger account, but will look for images of Britney Spears. It is a pessimistic view that is repeated throughout the book - online activism is seen as essentially weak and the internet is the new opiate of the masses. Sex, shopping and entertainment – this is the real American dream.

Much of Morozov's book, although intentionally "realist", can seem unduly pessimistic with regards to both the internet and people. Going as far as to quote Kierkegaard to validate his thesis, political Facebook campaigns are seen as nothing more than

'slacktivism' - cheap and essentially meaningless expressions of solidarity. His own grandiose claims (such as that of 'predictive censorship') can often look flimsy, he often excessively cites other people's opinions, and his language can often be long-winded and lofty – labels such as 'The Google Doctrine' and 'The Twitter Agenda' don't really lend themselves to balanced debate. Through no fault of his own, the timing of the publication of *The Net Delusion* is rather unfortunate. There is no mention of the student protests in London, and it would be interesting to see his view on the current use of social media to disseminate revolution in Tunisia and Egypt, for example. Tellingly, there are only three references to Wikileaks in the entire book. However, Morozov has written a provocative and heavily researched polemic (there is a huge bibliography), and perhaps his intent is not to completely dismiss the political and social potential of digital technologies, but to debunk any romantic idealism of their worth. He does attempt to advocate a policy of what he terms "cyber-realism", a situated "philosophy of action", although tellingly he is much clearer on what this does *not* constitute rather than in offering concrete proposals. As he frequently admits, there is very little evidence about the relationship between the internet and politics. As such, students looking at concepts of media and power, or the political connotations of social media, may find this useful, but not essential reading.

Whilst not in direct and explicit opposition to Morozov, an interesting counterpoint is provided by Leah Lievrouw's *Alternative and Activist New Media*, the latest publication in the excellent Media in Society series from Polity. This is an informed and accessible text which provides a sound introduction to the politics of digital media. Allowing for the difficulties in pinning down a constantly evolving medium (what she calls "a moving target") Lievrouw begins with a very useful definition of social media, before discussing five main areas of analysis: culture jamming, alternative computing, participatory journalism, mediated mobilisation and commons knowledge. Like Morozov, Lievrouw often draws on detailed historical examples to illustrate and contextualise her argument, such as in linking re-mix culture to both the Situationists and the Dada movement.

Of particular interest is her observation of how "subversive" practice slips into the mainstream – the rise of the citizen journalist, culture jamming giving rise to the concept of memes, and "hacktivism" pre-dating peer to peer networks, for example. The chapter on commons knowledge – "Challenging the Experts" – opens with a discussion on the Open Source movement, before exploring online collaboration, crowd-sourcing, folksonomies and Wikipedia. These, she argues, symbolise a shift in society's attitudes and relationships to both knowledge and power -through both reconfiguration and diversification, subversive social media use is seen to diversify from fringe to common practice. This, she argues in her final chapter, necessitates a possible shift of focus for scholars – from "the

media” to mediation. Drawing on a wide range of examples and a wealth of new media use, this is a well-written and important text for those studying media 2.0, social media, or concepts of media and power, and I would recommend it highly.

Lievrouw is making no grandiose claims that Morozov would be quick to deride – most of her focus is deliberately on small-scale, although still significant aspects of social media use. It may be stretching the point to argue that she is commending a form of cyber-realism such as that advocated by Morozov, but her chapter on mediated mobilisation provides an interesting contrast to his tirade. Looking in particular at the Global Justice movement she illustrates how, through the re-orientation and re-programming of existing structures, collective *concerns* become collective *action* through mobilisation. However, mobilisation through the social media, she argues, can often be more symbolic and narrative than material. Indeed, engagement can often be limited, as social media are used primarily for both a platform and a means of coordination - this is a target for much of Morozov’s derision, but perhaps hints at a broader misunderstanding on his part. Lievrouw illustrates how the social media is itself the physical manifestation of political ideals, echoing Castell’s observation that the articulation of an online social movement becomes “both its organisational form and its mode of action”. Perhaps I ought to join that Facebook group after all.

Steve Dixon