

Book review: 'To Save Everything, Click Here' by Evgeny Morozov

By **Tim Wu** April 12, 2013

Silicon Valley desperately needs good critics, for the tech industry represents an enormous concentration of private power and rivals government in its influence over our lives. Hence the promise of Evgeny Morozov, a one-time foreign policy expert turned tech writer, who is a talented prose stylist and a penetrating critic. His first book, "The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom," attacked "cyber-utopianism" in Hillary Rodham Clinton's State Department, throwing cold water on the idea that Twitter alone might solve the world's foreign policy problems.

In his new book, "To Save Everything, Click Here," Morozov has gone beyond foreign policy to complain about "solutionism" in technology, or the idea that deep and serious problems can be solved with a few cute apps.

Morozov deserves credit for his choice of topic, for tech thinkers do have a bad tendency to believe a little magic dust can fix any problem. One of the tech books he attacks, "Abundance: The Future Is Better Than You Think," by Peter H. Diamandis and Steven Kotler, actually posits that all of humanity's problems can be solved by 2035. And I tend to agree with Morozov that writers such as Jeff Jarvis, author and openness advocate, are entirely too forgiving of firms such as Facebook.

But from that point onward, we part company. Although I share his concerns about private power, Morozov oversells his points with a vehemence that takes a good cause and gives it a bad name.

The main theoretical goal of "To Save Everything, Click Here" is to deconstruct "the Internet." Morozov points out that what we call the Internet is really a bunch of wires and routers, making it "nonsense" to speak of the network as one thing for many purposes. Although the point was first made in the 1990s by scholars including myself and Lawrence Lessig, Morozov is right to say that discussing the Internet at the wrong level of technical abstraction can yield muddy thinking.

But the idea that the Internet is just a concept goes only so far. Even if it is dangerous to overgeneralize, we necessarily use concepts all the time, such as "the United States" or the "NFL." It sometimes makes sense to discuss the future of the United States, or the Internet, as one entity, even if we know it may change. For Morozov, however, any such discussions amount to "Internet-centrism," which for him seems to be a kind of thought crime.

The real utility of his theory is to imply that nearly everyone who writes about the Internet is an idiot, setting up virulent attacks, Morozov's true passion. Consider his critique of Kevin Kelly, who in 2010 wrote "What Technology Wants," an ambitious work of tech philosophy based on

experiences such as living off-grid and the choices made by the Amish, whom he admires. Kelly, an optimistic and religious man, believes that technology is part of nature, and that it evolves similarly. Morozov, and I kid you not, accuses Kelly of holding the same views as the Nazis. “The Nazis heard the voice of technology,” Morozov writes; “it informed them about gas chambers.” If that weren’t enough, he also accuses Kelly of Ayn Randism, and for an intellectual it is hard to say which is more disrespectful.

“To Save Everything, Click Here” is rife with such bullying and unfair attacks that seem mainly designed to build Morozov’s particular brand of trollism; one suspects he aspires to be a Bill O’Reilly for intellectuals. How else to explain the savaging of thinkers whom you might think of as his natural allies? Consider Nicholas Carr, another critic of Silicon Valley, who wrote a book, “The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains,” detailing the malicious effect of Web apps on our minds. He commits the unforgivable sin of discussing “the Internet” and is therefore guilty of what Morozov calls “McLuhanesque medium-centrism.” (Morozov is evidently licensed to use concepts, even if his targets are not). Similarly, although most of my work is an effort to put the Internet in historical or legal context, I, too, am an “Internet-centrist” (but at least I’m in good company).

Too much assault and battery creates a more serious problem: wrongful appropriation, as Morozov tends to borrow heavily, without attribution, from those he attacks. His critique of Google and other firms engaged in “algorithmic gatekeeping” is basically taken from Lessig’s first book, “Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace,” in which Lessig argued that technology is necessarily ideological and that choices embodied in code, unlike law, are dangerously insulated from political debate. Morozov presents these ideas as his own and, instead of crediting Lessig, bludgeons him repeatedly. Similarly, Morozov warns readers of the dangers of excessively perfect technologies as if Jonathan Zittrain hadn’t been saying the same thing for the past 10 years. His failure to credit his targets gives the misimpression that Morozov figured it all out himself and that everyone else is an idiot.

Does Morozov have an alternative vision of technology’s future? Generally, he decries the search for perfect, efficient solutions and admires an inefficient, organic chaos of the kind favored by Jane Jacobs in urban design. Funny, that’s exactly what the Internet’s protocols brought to communications, as a response to the big TV networks and AT&T’s “perfect” network. The ideology behind the Internet’s protocols accepts greater inefficiency to allow for the organic life and death of applications and firms. Hence, if you had to name one technology that best serves the principles Morozov believes in, it would be easy: It is called the Internet.

Forbidden by his own rule to like or even discuss “the Internet,” Morozov instead argues that he envisions inefficient technologies that make people think and deliberate about everything, such as radios that malfunction when they sense that the home is using too much energy. (The idea is that a radio user can reflect on whether he should, maybe, turn off some lights.) Forced-deliberation technology is a neat idea (although not original to Morozov either). But as a counter agenda for our

technological future, it is pretty thin stuff, unattuned to real human needs. It's just the old intellectual fantasy that constant deliberation about every decision would somehow make the world a better place.

Because of its hostile and abstract air, the main audience for Morozov's work won't be Silicon Valley readers, but tech-hating intellectuals warmed by his attacks because they already despise Google, Twitter and maybe just the West Coast in general. I came to the book sharing many of Morozov's concerns about the tech industry, but finished it feeling as though I'd watched a more intellectual version of cable news. Despite a promising topic, the defects in "To Save Everything, Click Here" render it pretty near worthless, and as such it is just a missed opportunity.

Tim Wu is a professor at Columbia Law School, a fellow at the New America Foundation and the author of "The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires."

TO SAVE EVERYTHING, CLICK HERE

The Folly of Technological Solutionism

By Evgeny Morozov

PublicAffairs. 415 pp. \$28.99

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In his latest book, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*, Morozov dismantles the myth that the Internet is inherently a force for social change; it can no more fix higher education, save the economy, or topple a dictator than it can make us stupid, lonely, or shallow. *To Save Everything* is animated by a thoroughgoing critique of two central ideas that Morozov terms "solutionism" and "Internet-centrism." The first describes an instrumental engagement with public life that regards all social and political issues as problems to be solved. By submitting this form, you are granting: Los Angeles Review of Books, 6671 Sunset Blvd., Ste. 1521, Los Angeles, California, 90028, United States, <http://lareviewofbooks.org> permission to email you. by Evgeny Morozov § RELEASE DATE: March 5, 2013. More righteous technological contrarianism from Morozov (*The Net Delusion*, 2011, etc.). Can technology solve social problems? To an extent, perhaps, writes the author. But for every Utopian application of a computer, dystopia awaits: Technology may afford hitherto disenfranchised or at least undercounted people an equal voice, but inside the world of clicks, likes and read-throughs lurk dragons. Morozov, who calls himself a "digital heretic," doesn't offer fully fleshed solutions to the problems a detechnologized world poses, but he dislikes the

Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism is, as you can imagine, a romp through collectivism and how we risk abandoning civilisation as we have recognised it for more than a thousand years, if we continue to harness optimism leveraging technology as our capacious conduit and arbiter of what is right and just. I didn't expect to be sucked in to Morozov's narrative here. It is dystopian and bleak and revolutionary in how he sets the context for this book that described in minute detail our relentless advance to the edge of the cliff and how societally and philosophical The BinCam example encapsulates what Morozov, a contributing editor at The New Republic, will go on to discuss in "To Save Everything, Click Here." The book crackles with intellectual energy and is encyclopedic in scope, examining the effects of technology on subjects ranging from politics to criminology to the endless quest to lose weight. One might wish for less breadth and more focus, however; often we barely have time to think about one topic when we are off to the next. Still, Morozov's overall perspective is vital and important. He derides an ideology he calls "Internet-centrism," which Technology, Evgeny Morozov proposes, can be a force for improvement "but only if we keep solutionism in check and learn to appreciate the imperfections of liberal democracy. Some of those imperfections are not accidental but by design. Arguing that we badly need a new, post-Internet way to debate the moral consequences of digital technologies, To Save Everything, Click Here warns against a world of seamless efficiency, where everyone is forced to wear Silicon Valley's digital straitjacket. Don't miss news from PublicAffairs. Don't miss news from PublicAffairs. SIGN UP. By clicking "Sign Up," The internet makes life easier but not always better, argues Tom Chivers, reviewing To Save Everything, Click Here by Evgeny Morozov. Credit: Photo: Alamy.

There are some books that persuade you less with the force of their ideas than with the beguiling quality of their writing. They're reasonable, calm, soothing; they don't want to browbeat you, they want to sidle in unthreateningly and change your mind without you noticing. Evgeny Morozov's To Save Everything, Click Here is not one of those books. It's a book littered with -isms and -ists, pejoratives and insults: "solutionism", "epochalism", "Internet-centrists", "technoescapism", "technonaivety" (they're all bad things). In his latest book, To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism, Morozov dismantles the myth that the Internet is inherently a force for social change; it can no more fix higher education, save the economy, or topple a dictator than it can make us stupid, lonely, or shallow. To Save Everything is animated by a thoroughgoing critique of two central ideas that Morozov terms "solutionism" and "Internet-centrism." The first describes an instrumental engagement with public life that regards all social and political issues as problems to be solved. By submitting this form, you are granting: Los Angeles Review of Books, 6671 Sunset Blvd., Ste. 1521, Los Angeles, California, 90028, United States, <http://lareviewofbooks.org> permission to email you.