

[Think Again: The Internet](#)

They told us it would usher in a new era of freedom, political activism, and perpetual peace. They were wrong. By EVGENY MOROZOV | [MAY/JUNE 2010](#)

The Internet Has Been a Force for Good

No. In the days when the Internet was young, our hopes were high. As with any budding love affair, we wanted to believe our newfound object of fascination could change the world. The Internet was lauded as the ultimate tool to foster tolerance, destroy nationalism, and transform the planet into one great wired global village. Writing in 1994, a group of digital aficionados led by Esther Dyson and Alvin Toffler published a manifesto modestly subtitled "[A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age](#)" that promised the rise of "electronic neighborhoods' bound together not by geography but by shared interests." Nicholas Negroponte, then the famed head of the MIT MediaLab, dramatically [predicted in 1997](#) that the Internet would shatter borders between nations and usher in a new era of world peace.

Well, the Internet as we know it has now been around for two decades, and it has certainly been transformative. The amount of goods and services available online is staggering. Communicating across borders is simpler than ever: Hefty international phone bills have been replaced by inexpensive subscriptions to Skype, while Google Translate helps readers navigate Web pages in Spanish, Mandarin, Maltese, and more than 40 other languages. But just as earlier generations were disappointed to see that neither the telegraph nor the radio delivered on the world-changing promises made by their most ardent cheerleaders, we haven't seen an Internet-powered rise in global peace, love, and liberty.

And we're not likely to. Many of the transnational networks fostered by the Internet arguably worsen -- rather than improve -- the world as we know it. At a recent gathering devoted to stamping out the illicit trade in endangered animals, for instance, the Internet was singled out as the main driver behind the increased global commerce in protected species. Today's Internet is a world where homophobic activists in Serbia are turning to Facebook to organize against gay rights, and where social conservatives in Saudi Arabia are setting up online equivalents of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. So much for the "freedom to connect" lauded by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her much-ballyhooed [speech](#) on the Internet and human rights.

Sadly enough, a networked world is not inherently a more just world.

Twitter Will Undermine Dictators.

Wrong. Tweets don't overthrow governments; people do. And what we've learned so far is that social networking sites can be both helpful and harmful to activists operating from inside authoritarian regimes. Cheerleaders of today's rapidly proliferating virtual protests point out that online services such as Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube have made it much easier to circulate information that in the past had been strictly controlled by the state -- especially gruesome photos and videos and evidence of abuses by police and the courts. Think of the Burmese dissidents who distributed cell-phone photos documenting how police suppressed protests, or opposition bloggers in Russia who launched Shpik.info as a Wikipedia-like site that allows anyone to upload photos, names, and contact details of purported "enemies of democracy" -- judges, police officers, even some politicians -- who are complicit in muzzling free speech. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown famously declared last year that the Rwandan genocide would have been impossible in the age of Twitter.

But does more information really translate into more power to right wrongs? Not necessarily. Neither the Iranian nor the Burmese regime has crumbled under the pressure of pixelated photos of human rights abuses circulated on social networking sites. Indeed, the Iranian authorities have been as eager to take advantage of the Internet as their green-clad opponents. After last year's protests in Tehran, Iranian authorities launched a website that publishes photos from the protests, urging the public to identify the unruly protesters by name. Relying on photos and videos uploaded to Flickr and YouTube by protesters and their Western sympathizers, the secret police now have a large pool of incriminating evidence. Neither Twitter nor Facebook provides the security required for a successful revolution, and they might even serve as an early warning system for authoritarian rulers. Had East Germans been tweeting about their feelings in 1989, who knows what the Stasi would have done to shut down dissent?

Even when Twitter and Facebook do help score partial victories, a betting man wouldn't put odds on the same trick working twice. Take the favorite poster child of digital utopians: In early 2008 a Facebook group started by a 33-year-old Colombian engineer culminated in massive protests, with up to 2 million people marching in Bogotá's streets to demonstrate against the brutality of Marxist FARC rebels. (A [New York Times](#) article about the protests gushed: "Facebook has helped bring public protest to Colombia, a country with no real history of mass demonstrations.") However, when the very same "digital revolutionaries" last September tried to organize a similar march against Venezuelan leader and FARC sponsor Hugo Chávez, they floundered.

The reasons why follow-up campaigns fail often have nothing to do with Facebook or Twitter, and everything to do with the more general problems of organizing and sustaining a political movement. Internet enthusiasts argue that the Web has made organizing easier. But this is only partially true; taking full advantage of online organizing requires a well-disciplined movement with clearly defined goals, hierarchies, and operational procedures (think of Barack Obama's presidential campaign). But if a political movement is disorganized and unfocused, the Internet might only expose and publicize its vulnerabilities and ratchet up the rancor of internecine conflicts. This, alas, sounds much like Iran's disorganized green movement.

Google Defends Internet Freedom.

Only when convenient. If the world's human rights community had to choose its favorite Fortune 500 company, Google -- the world's overwhelming leader in Internet search and a trendsetter in everything from global mapping to social networking-- would be a top contender. Decrying the Chinese government's censorship demands, Google recently decided to move its Chinese search engine to Hong Kong and promised to spare no effort to protect identities of Chinese dissidents who use Gmail. Much of the Western world applauded, as Google seemed to live up to its "[don't be evil](#)" corporate motto.

Let's remember that Google, like any company, is motivated by profit rather than some higher purpose: The company entered China not to spread the gospel of Internet freedom, but to sell ads in what is now the world's largest online market. Only four years after agreeing to censor its search results did it refuse to do so any longer. Yet had it managed to make greater inroads among Chinese consumers, does anyone doubt that its decision to defy Beijing would have been much more difficult?

Sometimes Google really does operate on principle. In early March, Google executives held a joint event with Freedom House, bringing bloggers from the Middle East to Washington to participate in a series of talks on such topics as "digital media's power in social movements" and "political parties and elections 2.0." Last summer, Google stood up to protect Cyxymu, a Georgian blogger who found himself the target of intense cyberattacks -- supposedly from

Russian nationalists unhappy with his take on the 2008 Russia-Georgia war -- by keeping his Google-hosted blog online. Following the incident, the company's [public-policy blog](#) even boasted of Google's commitment to "giving a voice to 'digital refugees.'"

But the company's reputation as a defender of Internet freedom is decidedly mixed. For example, its Internet filtering process in Thailand -- driven by the country's strict laws against insulting the monarchy -- is not particularly transparent and draws much criticism from the country's netizens. In India, Google faces understandable government pressure to remove extremist and nationalist content from Orkut, its social networking site; yet some Indian critics charge that Google is overzealous in its self-censorship because it fears losing access to the vast Indian market. Google's defense of Internet freedom is, ultimately, a pragmatically principled stance, with the rules often applied on a case-by-case basis. It would be somewhat naive -- and, perhaps, even dangerous -- to expect Google to become the new Radio Free Europe.

The Internet Makes Governments More Accountable.

Not necessarily. Many Internet enthusiasts on both sides of the Atlantic who were previously uninterested in policy debates have eagerly taken on the challenge of playing government watchdog, spending days and nights digitizing public data and uploading it into online databases. From Britain's [TheyWorkforYou](#) to Kenya's [Mzalendo](#) to various projects affiliated with the U.S.-based Sunlight Foundation such as [MAPLight.org](#), a host of new independent websites has begun monitoring parliamentary activity, with some even offering comparisons between parliamentarians' voting records and campaign promises.

But have such efforts resulted in better or more honest politics? The results, so far, are quite mixed. Even the most idealistic geeks are beginning to understand that entrenched political and institutional pathologies -- not technological shortfalls -- are the greatest barriers to more open and participatory politics.

Technology doesn't necessarily pry more information from closed regimes; rather, it allows more people access to information that is available. Governments still maintain great sway in determining what kinds of data to release. So far, even the Obama administration, the self-proclaimed champion of "[open government](#)," draws criticism from transparency groups for releasing information about population counts for horses and burros while hoarding more sensitive data on oil and gas leases.

And even when the most detailed data get released, it does not always lead to reformed policies, as Lawrence Lessig pointed out in his trenchant [New Republic cover story](#) last year. Establishing meaningful connections between information, transparency, and accountability will require more than just tinkering with spreadsheets; it will require building healthy democratic institutions and effective systems of checks and balances. The Internet can help, but only to an extent: It's political will, not more info, that is still too often missing.

The Internet Boosts Political Participation.

Define it. The Internet has certainly created new avenues for exchanging opinions and ideas, but we don't yet know whether this will boost the global appeal and practice of democracy. Where some see a renewal of civic engagement, others see "slacktivism," the new favorite pejorative for the shallow, peripheral, and fluid political campaigning that seems to thrive on the Internet -- sometimes at the expense of more effective real-world campaigning. And where some applaud new online campaigns purportedly aimed at increasing civic participation, such as Estonia's planned 2011 launch of voting via text-messaging, others, myself included, doubt whether the

hassle of showing up at a polling place once every two or four years is really what makes disengaged citizens avoid the political process.

The debate over the Internet's impact on participation echoes a much earlier controversy about the ambiguous social and political effects of cable television. Long before blogs were invented, scholars and pundits were arguing over whether the boob tube was turning voters into passive, apolitical entertainment maniacs who, when given greater choice, favored James Bond flicks and *Happy Days* reruns over nightly news broadcasts -- or whether it was turning them into hyperactive, obsessive citizens who watch C-SPAN nonstop. The argument then, and now, was that American-style democracy was turning into niche markets for politics, with the entertainment-obsessed masses opting out, on TV and at the polling booth, and news junkies looking for ever-quicker fixes in the sped-up news cycle. The Internet is cable television on steroids; both tuning in and tuning out of political discourse have never been easier.

Another danger is that even the news we read will come increasingly from selective sources, such as our Facebook friends, which might decrease the range of views to which we're exposed. Three-quarters of Americans who consume their news online say they receive at least some of it through forwarded emails or posts on social networking sites, according to a [2010 study](#) by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project. Presently, less than 10 percent of Americans report relying on just one media platform. But that could easily change as traditional news sources lose market share to the Web.

The Internet Is Killing Foreign News.

Only if we let it. You won't hear this from most Western news organizations, which today are fighting for their financial survival and closing foreign bureaus, but we've never had faster access to more world news than we do today. Aggregators like [Google News](#) might be disrupting the business models of CNN and the *New York Times*, forcing substantial cutbacks in one particularly costly form of news-gathering -- foreign correspondents -- but they have also equalized the playing field for thousands of niche and country-specific news sources, helping them to reach global audiences. How many people would be reading [AllAfrica.com](#) or the [Asia Times Online](#) were it not for Google News?

While we decry the Internet's role in destroying the business model that supported old-school foreign reporting, we should also celebrate the Web's unequivocally positive effects on the quality of research about global affairs done today on the periphery of the news business. The instantaneous fact-checking, ability to continuously follow a story from multiple sources, and extensive newspaper archives that are now freely available were unimaginable even 15 years ago.

The real danger in the changing face of foreign news is the absence of intelligent and respected moderators. The Internet may be a paradise for well-informed news junkies, but it is a confusing news junkyard for the rest of us. Even fairly sophisticated readers might not know the difference between the *Global Times*, a nationalist Chinese daily produced under the auspices of the Communist Party, and the *Epoch Times*, another China-related daily published by the Falun Gong dissident group.

The Internet Brings Us Closer Together.

No. Geography still matters. In her best-selling 1997 book, [The Death of Distance](#), the *Economist's* then senior editor Frances Cairncross [predicted](#) that the Internet-powered communications revolution would "increase understanding, foster tolerance, and ultimately promote worldwide peace." But pronouncing the death of distance was premature.

Even in a networked world, the hunger for consumer goods and information is still taste-dependent, and location remains a fairly reliable proxy for taste. A 2006 study published in the *Journal of International Economics*, for instance, found that for certain digital products -- such as music, games, and pornography -- each 1 percent increase in physical distance from the United States reduced by 3.25 percent the number of visits an American would make to a particular website.

Not only user preferences, but also government and corporate actions -- motivated as often by cost and copyright as by political agendas -- might mean the end of the era of the single Internet. That is to say, the days in which everyone can visit the same websites regardless of geographic location might be waning, even in the "free" world. We are seeing more attempts, mostly by corporations and their lawyers, to keep foreign nationals off certain Web properties. For instance, digital content that is available to Brits via the BBC's innovative [iPlayer](#) is increasingly unavailable to Germans. Norwegians can already access 50,000 copyrighted books online for free through the country's Bookshelfinitiative, but one has to be in Norway to do so -- the government is footing the annual \$900,000 bill for licensing fees and doesn't plan to subsidize the rest of the world.

Moreover, many celebrated Internet pioneers -- Google, Twitter, Facebook -- are U.S. companies that other governments increasingly fear as political agents. Chinese, Cuban, Iranian, and even Turkish politicians are already talking up "information sovereignty" -- a euphemism for replacing services provided by Western Internet companies with their own more limited but somewhat easier to control products, further splintering the World Wide Web into numerous national Internets. The age of the Splinternet beckons.

Two decades in, the Internet has neither brought down dictators nor eliminated borders. It has certainly not ushered in a post-political age of rational and data-driven policymaking. It has sped up and amplified many existing forces atwork in the world, often making politics more combustible and unpredictable. Increasingly, the Internet looks like a hypercharged version of the real world, with all of its promise and perils, while the cyber utopia that the early Web enthusiasts predicted seems ever more illusory.

Evgeny Morozov, Yahoo! fellow at Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, writes ForeignPolicy.com's [Net Effect](#) blog.

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