

The
**NET
DELUSION**

The Dark Side of Internet Freedom



EVGENY MOROZOV



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To Aernout van Lynden

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CONTENTS

Introduction, ix

- 1 The Google Doctrine 1
- 2 Texting Like It's 1989 33
- 3 Orwell's Favorite Lolcat 57
- 4 Censors and Sensibilities 85
- 5 Hugo Chavez Would Like to Welcome
You to the Spinternet 113
- 6 Why the KGB Wants You to Join Facebook 143
- 7 Why Kierkegaard Hates Slacktivism 179
- 8 Open Networks, Narrow Minds: Cultural
Contradictions of Internet Freedom 205
- 9 Internet Freedoms and Their
Consequences 245

- 10 Making History (More Than a
Browser Menu) 275
- 11 The Wicked Fix 301

Acknowledgments, 321

Bibliography, 325

Index, 395

About the Author, 409

INTRODUCTION

For anyone who wants to see democracy prevail in the most hostile and unlikely environments, the first decade of the new millennium was marked by a sense of bitter disappointment, if not utter disillusionment. The seemingly inexorable march of freedom that began in the late 1980s has not only come to a halt but may have reversed its course.

Expressions like “freedom recession” have begun to break out of the think-tank circuit and enter the public conversation. In a state of quiet desperation, a growing number of Western policymakers began to concede that the Washington Consensus—that set of dubious policies that once promised a neoliberal paradise at deep discounts—has been superseded by the Beijing Consensus, which boasts of delivering quick-and-dirty prosperity without having to bother with those pesky institutions of democracy.

The West has been slow to discover that the fight for democracy wasn’t won back in 1989. For two decades it has been resting on its laurels, expecting that Starbucks, MTV, and Google will do the rest just fine. Such a laissez-faire approach to democratization has proved rather toothless against resurgent authoritarianism, which has masterfully adapted to this new, highly globalized world. Today’s authoritarianism is of the hedonism- and consumerism-friendly variety, with Steve Jobs and Ashton Kutcher commanding far more respect than Mao or Che Guevara. No wonder the West appears at a loss. While the Soviets could be liberated by waving the magic wand of blue jeans, exquisite coffee

machines, and cheap bubble gum, one can't pull the same trick on China. After all, this is where all those Western goods come from.

Many of the signs that promised further democratization just a few years ago never quite materialized. The so-called color revolutions that swept the former Soviet Union in the last decade produced rather ambiguous results. Ironically, it's the most authoritarian of the former Soviet republics—Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan—that found those revolutions most useful, having discovered and patched their own vulnerabilities. My own birthplace, Belarus, once singled out by Condoleezza Rice as the last outpost of tyranny in Europe, is perhaps the shrewdest of the lot; it continues its slide into a weird form of authoritarianism, where the glorification of the Soviet past by its despotic ruler is fused with a growing appreciation of fast cars, expensive holidays, and exotic cocktails by its largely carefree populace.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were started, if anything, to spread the gospel of freedom and democracy, have lost much of their initial emancipatory potential as well, further blurring the line between “regime change” and “democracy promotion.” Coupled with Washington's unnecessary abuses of human rights and rather frivolous interpretations of international law, these two wars gave democracy promotion such a bad name that anyone eager to defend it is considered a Dick Cheney acolyte, an insane idealist, or both.

It is thus easy to forget, if only for therapeutic purposes, that the West still has an obligation to stand up for democratic values, speak up about violations of human rights, and reprimand those who abuse their office and their citizens. Luckily, by the twenty-first century the case for promoting democracy no longer needs to be made; even the hardest skeptics agree that a world where Russia, China, and Iran adhere to democratic norms is a safer world.

That said, there is still very little agreement on the kind of methods and policies the West needs to pursue to be most effective in promoting democracy. As the last few decades have so aptly illustrated, good intentions are hardly enough. Even the most noble attempts may easily backfire, entrenching authoritarianism as a result. The images of hor-

rific prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib were the result, if only indirectly, of one particular approach to promoting democracy. It did not exactly work as advertised.

Unfortunately, as the neoconservative vision for democratizing the world got discredited, nothing viable has come to fill the vacuum. While George Bush certainly overdid it with his excessive freedom-worshipping rhetoric, his successor seems to have abandoned the rhetoric, the spirit, as well as any desire to articulate what a post-Bush “freedom agenda” might look like.

But there is more to Obama's silence than just his reasonable attempt to present himself as anti-Bush. Most likely his silence is a sign of an extremely troubling bipartisan malaise: the growing Western fatigue with the project of promoting democracy. The project suffers not just from bad publicity but also from a deeply rooted intellectual crisis. The resilience of authoritarianism in places like Belarus, China, and Iran is not for lack of trying by their Western “partners” to stir things up with an expectation of a democratic revolution. Alas, most such Western initiatives flop, boosting the appeal of many existing dictators, who excel at playing up the threat of foreign mingling in their own affairs. To say that there is no good blueprint for dealing with modern authoritarianism would be a severe understatement.

Lost in their own strategizing, Western leaders are pining for something that has guaranteed effectiveness. Many of them look back to the most impressive and most unambiguous triumph of democracy in the last few decades: the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union. Not surprisingly—and who can blame them for seeking to bolster their own self-confidence?—they tend to exaggerate their own role in precipitating its demise. As a result, many of the Western strategies tried back then, like smuggling in photocopiers and fax machines, facilitating the flow of samizdat, and supporting radio broadcasts by Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America, are given much more credit than they deserve.

Such belated Cold War triumphalism results in an egregious logical fallacy. Since the Soviet Union eventually fell, those strategies are presumed

to have been extremely effective—in fact, crucial to the whole endeavor. The implications of such a view for the future of democracy promotion are tremendous, for they suggest that large doses of information and communications technology are lethal to the most repressive of regimes.

Much of the present excitement about the Internet, particularly the high hopes that are pinned on it in terms of opening up closed societies, stems from such selective and, at times, incorrect readings of history, rewritten to glorify the genius of Ronald Reagan and minimize the role of structural conditions and the inherent contradictions of the Soviet system.

It's for these chiefly historical reasons that the Internet excites so many seasoned and sophisticated decision makers who should really know better. Viewing it through the prism of the Cold War, they endow the Internet with nearly magical qualities; for them, it's the ultimate cheat sheet that could help the West finally defeat its authoritarian adversaries. Given that it's the only ray of light in an otherwise dark intellectual tunnel of democracy promotion, the Internet's prominence in future policy planning is assured.

And at first sight it seems like a brilliant idea. It's like Radio Free Europe on steroids. And it's cheap, too: no need to pay for expensive programming, broadcasting, and, if everything else fails, propaganda. After all, Internet users can discover the truth about the horrors of their regimes, about the secret charms of democracy, and about the irresistible appeal of universal human rights on their own, by turning to search engines like Google and by following their more politically savvy friends on social networking sites like Facebook. In other words, let them tweet, and they will tweet their way to freedom. By this logic, authoritarianism becomes unsustainable once the barriers to the free flow of information are removed. If the Soviet Union couldn't survive a platoon of pamphleteers, how can China survive an army of bloggers?

It's hardly surprising, then, that the only place where the West (especially the United States) is still unabashedly eager to promote democracy is in cyberspace. The Freedom Agenda is out; the Twitter Agenda is in. It's deeply symbolic that the only major speech about free-

dom given by a senior member of the Obama administration was Hillary Clinton's speech on Internet freedom in January 2010. It looks like a safe bet: Even if the Internet won't bring democracy to China or Iran, it can still make the Obama administration appear to have the most technologically savvy foreign policy team in history. The best and the brightest are now also the geekiest. The Google Doctrine—the enthusiastic belief in the liberating power of technology accompanied by the irresistible urge to enlist Silicon Valley start-ups in the global fight for freedom—is of growing appeal to many policymakers. In fact, many of them are as upbeat about the revolutionary potential of the Internet as their colleagues in the corporate sector were in the late 1990s. What could possibly go wrong here?

As it turns out, quite a lot. Once burst, stock bubbles have few lethal consequences; democracy bubbles, on the other hand, could easily lead to carnage. The idea that the Internet favors the oppressed rather than the oppressor is marred by what I call cyber-utopianism: a naïve belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downside. It stems from the starry-eyed digital fervor of the 1990s, when former hippies, by this time ensconced in some of the most prestigious universities in the world, went on an argumentative spree to prove that the Internet could deliver what the 1960s couldn't: boost democratic participation, trigger a renaissance of moribund communities, strengthen associational life, and serve as a bridge from bowling alone to blogging together. And if it works in Seattle, it must also work in Shanghai.

Cyber-utopians ambitiously set out to build a new and improved United Nations, only to end up with a digital Cirque du Soleil. Even if true—and that's a gigantic "if"—their theories proved difficult to adapt to non-Western and particularly nondemocratic contexts. Democratically elected governments in North America and Western Europe may, indeed, see an Internet-driven revitalization of their public spheres as a good thing; logically, they would prefer to keep out of the digital sandbox—at least as long as nothing illegal takes place. Authoritarian governments, on the other hand, have invested so much effort into suppressing any form of free expression and free assembly that they would

never behave in such a civilized fashion. The early theorists of the Internet's influence on politics failed to make any space for the state, let alone a brutal authoritarian state with no tolerance for the rule of law or dissenting opinions. Whatever book lay on the cyber-utopian bedside table in the early 1990s, it was surely not Hobbes's *Leviathan*.

Failing to anticipate how authoritarian governments would respond to the Internet, cyber-utopians did not predict how useful it would prove for propaganda purposes, how masterfully dictators would learn to use it for surveillance, and how sophisticated modern systems of Internet censorship would become. Instead most cyber-utopians stuck to a populist account of how technology empowers the *people*, who, oppressed by years of authoritarian rule, will inevitably rebel, mobilizing themselves through text messages, Facebook, Twitter, and whatever new tool comes along next year. (The *people*, it must be noted, really liked to hear such theories.) Paradoxically, in their refusal to see the downside of the new digital environment, cyber-utopians ended up belittling the role of the Internet, refusing to see that it penetrates and reshapes all walks of political life, not just the ones conducive to democratization.

I myself was intoxicated with cyber-utopianism until recently. This book is an attempt to come to terms with this ideology as well as a warning against the pernicious influence that it has had and is likely to continue to have on democracy promotion. My own story is fairly typical of idealistic young people who think they are onto something that could change the world. Having watched the deterioration of democratic freedoms in my native Belarus, I was drawn to a Western NGO that sought to promote democracy and media reform in the former Soviet bloc with the help of the Internet. Blogs, social networks, wikis: We had an arsenal of weapons that seemed far more potent than police batons, surveillance cameras, and handcuffs.

Nevertheless, after I spent a few busy years circling the former Soviet region and meeting with activists and bloggers, I lost my enthusiasm. Not only were our strategies failing, but we also noticed a significant push back from the governments we sought to challenge. They were beginning to experiment with censorship, and some went so far as to start

aggressively engaging with new media themselves, paying bloggers to spread propaganda and troll social networking sites looking for new information on those in the opposition. In the meantime, the Western obsession with the Internet and the monetary support it guaranteed created numerous hazards typical of such ambitious development projects. Quite predictably, many of the talented bloggers and new media entrepreneurs preferred to work for the extremely well-paid but largely ineffective Western-funded projects instead of trying to create more nimble, sustainable, and, above all, effective projects of their own. Thus, everything we did—with generous funding from Washington and Brussels—seemed to have produced the results that were the exact opposite of what my cyber-utopian self wanted.

It was tempting to throw my hands up in despair and give up on the Internet altogether. But this would have been the wrong lesson to draw from these disappointing experiences. Similarly, it would be wrong for Western policymakers to simply dismiss the Internet as a lost cause and move on to bigger, more important issues. Such digital defeatism would only play into the hands of authoritarian governments, who would be extremely happy to continue using it as both a carrot (keeping their populace entertained) and a stick (punishing those who dare to challenge the official line). Rather, the lesson to be drawn is that the Internet is here to stay, it will continue growing in importance, and those concerned with democracy promotion need not only grapple with it but also come up with mechanisms and procedures to ensure that another tragic blunder on the scale of Abu Ghraib will never happen in cyberspace. This is not a far-fetched scenario. How hard is it to imagine a site like Facebook inadvertently disclosing the private information of activists in Iran or China, tipping off governments to secret connections between the activists and their Western funders?

To be truly effective, the West needs to do more than just cleanse itself of cyber-utopian bias and adopt a more realist posture. When it comes to concrete steps to promote democracy, cyber-utopian convictions often give rise to an equally flawed approach that I dub "Internet-centrism." Unlike cyber-utopianism, Internet-centrism is not a set of beliefs; rather, it's a philosophy of action that informs how decisions,

including those that deal with democracy promotion, are made and how long-term strategies are crafted. While cyber-utopianism stipulates *what* has to be done, Internet-centrism stipulates *how* it should be done. Internet-centrists like to answer every question about democratic change by first reframing it in terms of the Internet rather than the context in which that change is to occur. They are often completely oblivious to the highly political nature of technology, especially the Internet, and like to come up with strategies that assume that the logic of the Internet, which, in most cases, they are the only ones to perceive, will shape every environment than it penetrates rather than vice versa.

While most utopians are Internet-centrists, the latter are not necessarily utopians. In fact, many of them like to think of themselves as pragmatic individuals who have abandoned grand theorizing about utopia in the name of achieving tangible results. Sometimes, they are even eager to acknowledge that it takes more than bytes to foster, install, and consolidate a healthy democratic regime.

Their realistic convictions, however, rarely make up for their flawed methodology, which prioritizes the tool over the environment, and, as such, is deaf to the social, cultural, and political subtleties and indeterminacies. Internet-centrism is a highly disorienting drug; it ignores context and entraps policymakers into believing that they have a useful and powerful ally on their side. Pushed to its extreme, it leads to hubris, arrogance, and a false sense of confidence, all bolstered by the dangerous illusion of having established effective command of the Internet. All too often, its practitioners fashion themselves as possessing full mastery of their favorite tool, treating it as a stable and finalized technology, oblivious to the numerous forces that are constantly reshaping the Internet—not all of them for the better. Treating the Internet as a constant, they fail to see their own responsibility in preserving its freedom and reigning in the ever-powerful intermediaries, companies like Google and Facebook.

As the Internet takes on an even greater role in the politics of both authoritarian and democratic states, the pressure to forget the context and start with what the Internet allows will only grow. All by itself, however, the Internet provides nothing certain. In fact, as has become ob-

vious in too many contexts, it empowers the strong and disempowers the weak. It is impossible to place the Internet at the heart of the enterprise of democracy promotion without risking the success of that very enterprise.

The premise of this book is thus very simple: To salvage the Internet's promise to aid the fight against authoritarianism, those of us in the West who still care about the future of democracy will need to ditch both cyber-utopianism and Internet-centrism. Currently, we start with a flawed set of assumptions (cyber-utopianism) and act on them using a flawed, even crippled, methodology (Internet-centrism). The result is what I call the Net Delusion. Pushed to the extreme, such logic is poised to have significant global consequences that may risk undermining the very project of promoting democracy. It's a folly that the West could do without.

Instead, we'll need to opt for policies informed by a realistic assessment of the risks and dangers posed by the Internet, matched by a highly scrupulous and unbiased assessment of its promises, and a theory of action that is highly sensitive to the local context, that is cognizant of the complex connections between the Internet and the rest of foreign policymaking, and that originates not in what technology allows but in what a certain geopolitical environment requires.

In a sense, giving in to cyber-utopianism and Internet-centrism is akin to agreeing to box blindfolded. Sure, every now and then we may still strike some powerful blows against our authoritarian adversaries, but in general this is a poor strategy if we want to win. The struggle against authoritarianism is too important of a battle to fight with a voluntary intellectual handicap, even if that handicap allows us to play with the latest fancy gadgets.

chapter one

The Google Doctrine



In June 2009 thousands of young Iranians—smartphones in their hands (and, for the more advanced, Bluetooth headsets in their ears)—poured into the stuffy streets of Tehran to protest what they believed to be a fraudulent election. Tensions ran high, and some protesters, in an unthinkable offense, called for the resignation of Ayatollah Khamenei. But many Iranians found the elections to be fair; they were willing to defend the incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad if needed. Iranian society, buffeted by the conflicting forces of populism, conservatism, and modernity, was facing its most serious political crisis since the 1979 revolution that ended the much-disliked reign of the pro-American Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

But this was not the story that most Western media chose to prioritize; instead, they preferred to muse on how the Internet was ushering in democracy into the country. “The Revolution Will Be Twittered” was the first in a series of blog posts published by the *Atlantic’s* Andrew Sullivan a few hours after the news of the protests broke. In it, Sullivan zeroed in on the resilience of the popular microblogging site Twitter, arguing that “as the regime shut down other forms of communication,

Twitter survived. With some remarkable results." In a later post, even though the "remarkable results" were still nowhere to be seen, Sullivan proclaimed Twitter to be "the critical tool for organizing the resistance in Iran" but didn't bother to quote any evidence to support his claim. Only a few hours after the protests began, his blog emerged as a major information hub that provided almost instantaneous links to Iran-related developments. Thousands of readers who didn't have the stamina to browse hundreds of news sites saw events unfolding in Iran primarily through Sullivan's eyes. (And, as it turned out, his were a rather optimistic pair.)

It didn't take long for Sullivan's version of events to gain hold elsewhere in the blogosphere—and soon enough, in the traditional media as well. Michelle Malkin, the right-wing blogging diva, suggested that "in the hands of freedom-loving dissidents, the micro-blogging social network is a revolutionary samizdat—undermining the mullah-crazy's information blockades one Tweet at a time." Marc Ambinder, Sullivan's colleague at the *Atlantic*, jumped on the bandwagon, too; for him, Twitter was so important that he had to invent a new word, "protagonal," to describe it. "When histories of the Iranian election are written, Twitter will doubtless be cast a protagonal technology that enabled the powerless to survive a brutal crackdown," wrote Ambinder on his blog. The *Wall Street Journal's* Yochi Dreazen proclaimed that "this [revolution] would not happen without Twitter," while National Public Radio's Daniel Schorr announced that "in Iran, tyranny has run afoul of technology in the form of the Internet, turning a protest into a movement." When Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* asserted that in "the quintessential 21st-century conflict . . . on one side are government thugs firing bullets . . . [and] on the other side are young protesters firing 'tweets,'" he was simply registering the zeitgeist.

Soon technology pundits, excited that their favorite tool was all over the media, were on the case as well. "This is it. The big one. This is the first revolution that has been catapulted onto a global stage and transformed by social media," proclaimed New York University's Clay Shirky in an interview with TED.com. Jonathan Zittrain, a Harvard academic and the author of *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It*, alleged

that "Twitter, in particular, has proven particularly adept at organizing people and information." John Gapper, a business columnist for the *Financial Times*, opined that Twitter was "the tinderbox that fanned the spark of revolt among supporters of Mir-Hossein Moussavi." Even the usually sober *Christian Science Monitor* joined in the cyber-celebrations, noting that "the government's tight control of the Internet has spawned a generation adept at circumventing cyber road blocks, making the country ripe for a technology-driven protest movement."*

Twitter seemed omnipotent—certainly more so than the Iranian police, the United Nations, the U.S. government, and the European Union. Not only would it help to rid Iran of its despicable leader but also convince ordinary Iranians, most of whom vehemently support the government's aggressive pursuit of nuclear enrichment, that they should stop their perpetual fretting about Israel and simply go back to being their usual peaceful selves. A column in the right-wing *Human Events* declared that Twitter had accomplished "what neither the U.N. nor the European Union have [*sic*] been able to do," calling it "a huge threat to the Iranian regime—a pro-liberty movement being fomented and organized in short sentences." Likewise, the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* argued that "the Twitter-powered 'Green Revolution' in Iran . . . has used social-networking technology to do more for regime change in the Islamic Republic than years of sanctions, threats and Geneva-based haggling put together." It seemed that Twitter was improving not only democracy but diplomacy as well.

Soon enough, pundits began using the profusion of Iranian tweets as something of an excuse to draw far-reaching conclusions about the future of the world in general. To many, Iran's Twitter-inspired protests clearly indicated that authoritarianism was doomed everywhere. In a

* A confession is in order here: I was one of the first to fall into the Twitter Revolution trap, christening similar youth protests in Moldova, which happened a few months before Iran's, with what proved to be that sticky and extremely misleading moniker. Even though I quickly qualified it with a long and nuanced explanation, it is certainly not the proudest moment in my career, especially as all those nuances were lost on most media covering the events.

column modestly entitled "Tyranny's New Nightmare: Twitter," *Los Angeles Times* writer Tim Rutten declared that "as new media spreads its Web worldwide, authoritarians like those in Iran will have a difficult time maintaining absolute control in the face of the technology's chaotic democracy." That the Green Movement was quickly disintegrating and was unable to mount a serious challenge to Ahmadinejad didn't prevent the editorial page of the *Baltimore Sun* from concluding that the Internet was making the world safer and more democratic: "The belief that activists are blogging their lives away while governments and corporations take greater control of the world is being proven false with every tweet, every blog comment, every protest planned on Facebook."

Inspired by similar logic, Mark Pfeifle, former deputy national security advisor in the George W. Bush administration, launched a public campaign to nominate Twitter for the Nobel Peace Prize, arguing that "without Twitter, the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy." The Webby Awards, the Internet's equivalent of the Oscars, hailed the Iranian protests as "one of the top ten Internet moments of the decade." (The Iranian youths—or, rather, their smartphones—were in good company: The expansion of Craigslist beyond San Francisco in 2000 and the launch of Google AdWords in 2004 were among other honorees.)

But it was Gordon Brown, then the prime minister of the United Kingdom, who drew the most ridiculous conclusion from the events in Iran. "You cannot have Rwanda again because information would come out far more quickly about what is actually going on and the public opinion would grow to the point where action would need to be taken," he argued. "This week's events in Iran are a reminder of the way that people are using new technology to come together in new ways to make their views known." On Brown's logic, the millions who poured into the streets of London, New York, Rome, and other cities on February 15, 2003, to protest the impending onset of the Iraq War made one silly mistake: They didn't blog enough about it. *That* would have definitely prevented the bloodbath.

Hail the Google Doctrine

Iran's seemed like a revolution that the whole world was not just watching but also blogging, tweeting, Googling, and YouTubing. It only took a few clicks to get bombarded by links that seemed to shed more light on events in Iran—quantitatively, if not qualitatively—than anything carried by what technologists like to condescendingly call "legacy media." While the latter, at least in their rare punditry-free moments of serenity, were still trying to provide some minimal context to the Iranian protests, many Internet users preferred to simply get the raw deal on Twitter, gorging on as many videos, photos, and tweets as they could stomach. Such virtual proximity to events in Tehran, abetted by access to the highly emotional photos and videos shot by protesters themselves, led to unprecedented levels of global empathy with the cause of the Green Movement. But in doing so, such networked intimacy may have also greatly inflated popular expectations of what it could actually achieve.

As the Green Movement lost much of its momentum in the months following the election, it became clear that the Twitter Revolution so many in the West were quick to inaugurate was nothing more than a wild fantasy. And yet it still can boast of at least one unambiguous accomplishment: If anything, Iran's Twitter Revolution revealed the intense Western longing for a world where information technology is the liberator rather than the oppressor, a world where technology could be harvested to spread democracy around the globe rather than entrench existing autocracies. The irrational exuberance that marked the Western interpretation of what was happening in Iran suggests that the green-clad youngsters tweeting in the name of freedom nicely fit into some preexisting mental schema that left little room for nuanced interpretation, let alone skepticism about the actual role the Internet played at the time.

The fervent conviction that given enough gadgets, connectivity, and foreign funding, dictatorships are doomed, which so powerfully manifested itself during the Iranian protests, reveals the pervasive influence

of the Google Doctrine. But while the mania surrounding Iran's Twitter Revolution helped to crystallize the main tenets of the doctrine, it did not beget those tenets. In fact, the Google Doctrine has a much finer intellectual pedigree—much of it rooted in the history of the Cold War—than many of its youthful proponents realize. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman was already warning about such premature triumphalism back in 1999 when he ridiculed its core beliefs in a book review. Ironically enough, the book was by Tom Friedman, his future fellow *New York Times* columnist. According to Krugman, too many Western observers, with Friedman as their cheerleader in chief, were falling under the false impression that thanks to advances in information technology “old-fashioned power politics is becoming increasingly obsolete, because it conflicts with the imperatives of global capitalism.” Invariably they were reaching the excessively optimistic conclusion that “we are heading for a world that is basically democratic, because you can't keep 'em down on the farm once they have Internet access, and basically peaceful, because George Soros will pull out his money if you rattle your saber.” And in a world like this, how can anything but democracy triumph in the long run?

As such, the Google Doctrine owes less to the advent of tweeting and social networking than it does to the giddy sense of superiority that many in the West felt in 1989, as the Soviet system collapsed almost overnight. As history was supposed to be ending, democracy was quickly pronounced the only game in town. Technology, with its unique ability to fuel consumerist zeal—itsself seen as a threat to any authoritarian regime—as well as its prowess to awaken and mobilize the masses against their rulers, was thought to be the ultimate liberator. There is a good reason why one of the chapters in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and The Last Man*, the ur-text of the early 1990s that successfully bridged the worlds of positive psychology and foreign affairs, was titled “The Victory of the VCR.”

The ambiguity surrounding the end of the Cold War made such arguments look far more persuasive than any close examination of their theoretical strengths would warrant. While many scholars took it to mean that the austere logic of Soviet-style communism, with its five-

year plans and constant shortages of toilet paper, had simply run its course, most popular interpretations downplayed the structural deficiencies of the Soviet regime—who would want to acknowledge that the Evil Empire was only a bad joke?—preferring to emphasize the momentous achievements of the dissident movement, armed and nurtured by the West, in its struggle against a ruthless totalitarian adversary. According to this view, without the prohibited samizdat materials, photocopiers, and fax machines that were smuggled into the Soviet bloc, the Berlin Wall might have still been with us today. Once the Soviet Union's VCR movement had arrived, communism was untenable.

The two decades that followed were a mixed bag. VCR moments were soon superseded by DVD moments, and yet such impressive breakthroughs in technology failed to bring on any impressive breakthroughs in democratization. Some authoritarian regimes, like those in Slovakia and Serbia, fell. Others, like in Belarus and Kazakhstan, only got stronger. In addition, the tragedy of 9/11 seemed to suggest that history was returning from its protracted holiday in Florida and that another ubiquitous and equally reductionist thesis of the early 1990s, that of the clash of civilizations, would come to dominate the intellectual agenda of the new century. As a result, many of the once popular arguments about the liberating power of consumerism and technology faded from public view. That Al-Qaeda seemed to be as proficient in using the Internet as its Western opponents did not chime well with a view that treated technology as democracy's best friend. The dotcom crash of 2000 also reduced the fanatical enthusiasm over the revolutionary nature of new technologies: the only things falling under the pressure of the Internet were stock markets, not authoritarian regimes.

But as the Iranian events of 2009 have so clearly demonstrated, the Google Doctrine was simply put on the backburner; it did not collapse. The sighting of pro-democratic Iranians caught in a tight embrace with Twitter, a technology that many Westerners previously saw as a rather peculiar way to share one's breakfast plans, was enough to fully rehabilitate its core principles and even update them with a fancier Web 2.0 vocabulary. The almost-forgotten theory that people, once armed with a powerful technology, would triumph over the most brutal

adversaries—regardless of what gas and oil prices are at the time—was suddenly enjoying an unexpected intellectual renaissance.

Had the Iranian protests succeeded, it seems fairly certain that “The Victory of Tweets” would be too good of a chapter title to go to waste. Indeed, at some point in June 2009, if only for a brief moment, it seemed as if history might be repeating itself, ridding the West of yet another archenemy—and the one with dangerous nuclear ambitions. After all, the streets of Tehran in the summer of 2009 looked much like those of Leipzig, Warsaw, or Prague in the fall of 1989. Back in ‘89, few in the West had the guts or the imagination to believe that such a brutal system—a system that always seemed so invulnerable and determined to live—could fall apart so peacefully. Iran, it seemed, was giving Western observers the long-awaited chance to redeem themselves over their dismal performance in 1989 and embrace the Hegelian spirit of history before it had fully manifested itself.

Whatever the political and cultural differences between the crowds that were rocking Iran in 2009 and the crowds that rocked Eastern Europe in 1989, both cases seemed to share at least one common feature: a heavy reliance on technology. Those in the streets of Eastern Europe did not yet have BlackBerries and iPhones, but their fight was, nevertheless, abetted by technologies of a different, mostly analog variety: photocopiers and fax machines, radios tuned to Radio Free Europe and Voice of America, video cameras of Western television crews. And while in 1989 few outsiders could obtain immediate access to the most popular antigovernment leaflets or flip through clandestine photos of police brutality, in 2009 one could follow the Iranian protests pretty much the same way one could follow the Super Bowl or the Grammys: by refreshing one’s Twitter page. Thus, any seasoned observers of foreign affairs—and particularly those who had a chance to compare what they saw in 1989 to what they were seeing in 2009—knew, if only intuitively, that the early signs coming from the streets of Tehran seemed to vindicate the Google Doctrine. With that in mind, conclusions about the inevitable collapse of the Iranian regime did not seem so far-fetched. Only a lazy pundit would not have pronounced Iran’s Twitter

Revolution a success when all the signs were suggesting the inevitability of Ahmadinejad’s collapse.

The Unimaginable Consequences of an Imagined Revolution

It must have been similar reasoning—at times bordering on hubris—that led American diplomats to commit a terrible policy blunder at the height of the Iranian protests. Swayed by the monotony of media commentary, the flood of Iran-related messages on Twitter, or his own institutional and professional agendas, a senior official at the U.S. State Department sent an email to executives at Twitter, inquiring if they could reschedule the previously planned—and now extremely ill-timed—maintenance of the site, so as not to disrupt the Iranian protests. Twitter’s management complied but publicly emphasized that they reached that decision independently.

The historic significance of what may have seemed like a simple email was not lost on the *New York Times*, which described it as “another new-media milestone” for the Obama administration, attesting to “the recognition by the United States government that an Internet blogging service that did not exist four years ago has the potential to change history in an ancient Islamic country.” The *New York Times* may have exaggerated the amount of deliberation that the Obama administration invested in the issue (a White House spokesman immediately downplayed the significance of the “milestone” by claiming that “this wasn’t a directive from Secretary of State, but rather was a low-level contact from someone who often talks to Twitter staff”), but the Gray Lady was spot on in assessing its overall importance.

Contrary to Marc Ambinder’s prediction, when future historians look at what happened in those few hot weeks in June 2009, that email correspondence—which the State Department chose to widely publicize to bolster its own new media credentials—is likely to be of far greater importance than anything the Green Movement actually did on the Internet. Regardless of the immediate fate of democracy in Iran,

the world is poised to feel the impact of that symbolic communication for years to come.

For the Iranian authorities, such contact between its sworn enemies in the U.S. government and a Silicon Valley firm providing online services that, at least as the Western media described it, were beloved by their citizens quickly gave rise to suspicions that the Internet is an instrument of Western power and that its ultimate end is to foster regime change in Iran. Suddenly, the Iranian authorities no longer saw the Internet as an engine of economic growth or as a way to spread the word of the prophet. All that mattered at the time was that the Web presented an unambiguous threat that many of Iran's enemies would be sure to exploit. Not surprisingly, once the protests quieted down, the Iranian authorities embarked on a digital purge of their opponents.

In just a few months, the Iranian government formed a high-level twelve-member cybercrime team and tasked it with finding any false information—or, as they put it, “insults and lies”—on Iranian websites. Those spreading false information were to be identified and arrested. The Iranian police began hunting the Internet for photos and videos that showed faces of the protesters—numerous, thanks to the ubiquity of social media—to publish them on Iranian news media websites and ask the public for help in identifying the individuals. In December 2009 the pro-Ahmadinejad *Raja News* website published a batch of thirty-eight photos with sixty-five faces circled in red and a batch of forty-seven photos with about a hundred faces circled in red. According to the Iranian police, public tip-offs helped to identify and arrest at least forty people. Ahmadinejad's supporters may have also produced a few videos of their own, including a clip—which many in the opposition believed to be a montage—that depicted a group of protesters burning a portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini. If people had believed that the footage was genuine, it could have created a major split in the opposition, alienating vast swathes of the Iranian population.

The police or someone acting on their behalf also went searching for personal details—mostly Facebook profiles and email addresses—of Iranians living abroad, sending them threatening messages and urging them not to support the Green Movement unless they wanted to

hurt their relatives back in Iran. In the meantime, the authorities were equally tough on Iranians in the country, warning them to stay away from social networking sites used by the opposition. The country's police chief Gen. Ismail Ahmadi Moghaddam warned that those who incited others to protest or issued appeals “have committed a worse crime than those who come to the streets.” Passport control officers at Tehran's airport asked Iranians living abroad if they had Facebook accounts; they would often double-check online, regardless of the answer, and proceed to write down any suspicious-looking online friends a traveler might have.

The authorities, however, did not dismiss technology outright. They, too, were more than happy to harvest its benefits. They turned to text messaging—on a rather massive scale—to warn Iranians to stay away from street protests in the future. One such message, sent by the intelligence ministry, was anything but friendly: “Dear citizen, according to received information, you have been influenced by the destabilizing propaganda which the media affiliated with foreign countries have been disseminating. In case of any illegal action and contact with the foreign media, you will be charged as a criminal consistent with the Islamic Punishment Act and dealt with by the Judiciary.”

In the eyes of the Iranian government, the Western media was guilty of more than spreading propaganda; they accused CNN of “training hackers” after the channel reported on various cyber-attacks that Ahmadinejad's opponents were launching on websites deemed loyal to his campaign. Recognizing that the enemy was winning the battle in the virtual world, one ayatollah eventually allowed pious Iranians to use any tool, even if it contravened Shari'a law, in their online fight. “In a war, anti-Shari'a [moves] are permissible; the same applies to a cyber-war. The conditions are such that you should fight the enemy in any way you can. You don't need to be considerate of anyone. If you don't hit them, the enemy will hit you,” proclaimed Ayatollah Alam Ahdi during a Friday Prayer sermon in 2010.

But the campaign against CNN was a drop in the sea compared to the accusations launched against Twitter, which the pro-Ahmadinejad Iranian media immediately took to be the real source of unrest in the

country. An editorial in *Javan*, a hard-line Iranian newspaper, accused the U.S. State Department of trying to foment a revolution via the Internet by helping Twitter stay online, stressing its “effective role in the continuation of riots.” Given the previous history of American interference in the country’s affairs—most Iranians still fret about the 1953 coup masterminded by the CIA—such accusations are likely to stick, painting all Twitter users as a secret American revolutionary vanguard. In contrast to the tumultuous events of 1953, the Twitter Revolution did not seem to have its Kermit Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt’s grandson and the coordinator of CIA’s Operation Ajax, which resulted in the overthrow of the nationalist government of Mohammad Mosaddegh. But in the eyes of the Iranian authorities the fact that today’s digital vanguards have no obvious charismatic coordinators only made them seem more dangerous. (The Iranian propaganda officials could not contain their glee when they discovered that Kermit Roosevelt was a close relative of John Palfrey, the faculty codirector of Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, a think tank that the U.S. State Department had funded to study the Iranian blogosphere.)

Other governments also took notice, perhaps out of fear that they, too, might soon have a Twitter Revolution on their hands. Chinese authorities interpreted Washington’s involvement in Iran as a warning sign that digital revolutions facilitated by American technology companies are not spontaneous but carefully staged affairs. “How did the unrest after the Iranian elections come about?” pondered an editorial in the *People’s Daily*, the chief mouthpiece of the Communist Party. “It was because online warfare launched by America, via YouTube video and Twitter microblogging, spread rumors, created splits, stirred up, and sowed discord between the followers of conservative reformist factions.” Another major outlet of government propaganda, Xinhua News Agency, took a more philosophical view, announcing that “information technology that has brought mankind all kinds of benefits has this time become a tool for interfering in the internal affairs of other countries.”

A few months after the Iranian protests, *China National Defense*, an official outlet of the Chinese military, ran a similar editorial, lumping April 2010 youth protests in Moldova with those of Iran and treating

both as prime examples of Internet-enabled foreign intervention. The editorial, singling out the United States as the “keenest Western power to add the internet to its diplomatic arsenal,” also linked those two protests to an ethnic uprising in China’s own Xinjiang province in July 2009, concluding that more Internet control was in order, if only “to avoid the internet becoming a new poisoned arrow for hostile forces.” Bizarrely, the irresponsible Iran-related punditry in Washington allowed leaders in Beijing to build a credible case for more Internet censorship in China. (The online blockade of the Xinjiang region only ended in early 2010.)

Media in the former Soviet Union took notice as well. “The Demonstrations in Iran Followed the Moldovan Scenario: The U.S. Got Burnt” proclaimed a headline on a Russian nationalist portal. A prime-time news program on the popular Russian TV channel NTV announced that the “Iranian protesters were enjoying the support of the U.S. State Department, which interfered in the internal activities of Twitter, a trendy Internet service.” A newspaper in Moldova reported that the U.S. government even supplied Twitter with cutting-edge anticensorship technology.

This was globalization at its worst: A simple email based on the premise that Twitter mattered in Iran, sent by an American diplomat in Washington to an American company in San Francisco, triggered a worldwide Internet panic and politicized all online activity, painting it in bright revolutionary colors and threatening to tighten online spaces and opportunities that were previously unregulated. Instead of finding ways to establish long-term relationships with Iranian bloggers and use their work to quietly push for social, cultural, and—at some distant point in the future—maybe even political change, the American foreign policy establishment went on the record and pronounced them to be more dangerous than Lenin and Che Guevara combined. As a result, many of these “dangerous revolutionaries” were jailed, many more were put under secret surveillance, and those poor Iranian activists who happened to be attending Internet trainings funded by the U.S. State Department during the election could not return home and had to apply for asylum. (At least five such individuals got trapped in Europe.) The

pundits were right: Iran's Twitter Revolution did have global repercussions. Those were, however, extremely ambiguous, and they often strengthened rather than undermined the authoritarian rule.

A Revolution in Search of Revolutionaries

Of course, American diplomats had no idea how the Iranian protests would turn out; it would be unfair to blame them for the apparent inability of the Green Movement to unseat Ahmadinejad. When the future of Iranian democracy depended on the benevolence of a Silicon Valley start-up that seemed oblivious to the geopolitical problems besetting the world, what other choice did they have but to intervene? Given what was at stake, isn't it preposterous to quibble about angry editorials in Moldovan newspapers that may have appeared even if the State Department stayed on the sidelines?

All of this is true—as long as there is evidence to assert that the situation was, indeed, dramatic. Should it prove lacking or inconclusive, American diplomats deserve more than a mere spanking. There is absolutely no excuse for giving the air of intervening into internal affairs of either private companies or foreign governments while, in reality, Western policymakers are simply standing in the corner, daydreaming about democracy and babbling their wildest fantasies into an open mic. In most cases, such “interventions” right no wrongs; instead they usually create quite a few wrongs of their own, producing unnecessary risks for those who were naïve enough to think of the U.S. government as a serious and reliable partner. American pundits go to talk shows; Iranian bloggers go to prison. The bold request sent to Twitter by the U.S. State Department could only be justified on the condition that Twitter was, indeed, playing a crucial role in the Iranian unrest and that the cause of Iranian democracy would be severely undermined had the site gone into maintenance mode for a few hours.

None of this seems to be the case. The digital witch hunts put on by the Iranian government may have been targeting imaginary enemies, created in part by the worst excesses of Western media and the hubris of Western policymakers. Two uncertainties remain to this day. First,

how many people inside Iran (as opposed to those outside) were tweeting about the protests? Second, was Twitter actually used as a key tool for organizing the protests, as many pundits implied, or was its relevance limited only to sharing news and raising global awareness about what was happening?

On the first question, the evidence is at best inconclusive. There were indeed a lot of Iran-related tweets in the two weeks following the election, but it is impossible to say how many of them came from Iran as opposed to, say, its three-million-strong diaspora, sympathizers of the Green Movement elsewhere, and provocateurs loyal to the Iranian regime. Analysis by Sysomos, a social media analysis company, found only 19,235 Twitter accounts registered in Iran (0.027 percent of the population) on the eve of the 2009 elections. As many sympathizers of the Green Movement began changing their Twitter location status to Tehran to confuse the Iranian authorities, it also became nearly impossible to tell whether the people supposedly “tweeting” from Iran were in Tehran or in, say, Los Angeles. One of the most active Twitter users sharing the news about the protests, “oxfordgirl,” was an Iranian journalist residing in the English county of Oxfordshire. She did an excellent job—but only as an information hub.

Speaking in early 2010, Moeed Ahmad, director of new media for Al-Jazeera, stated that fact-checking by his channel during the protests could confirm only sixty active Twitter accounts in Tehran, a number that fell to six once the Iranian authorities cracked down on online communications. This is not to understate the overall prominence of Iran-related news on Twitter in the first week of protests; research by Pew Research Center found that 98 percent of all the most popular links shared on the site during that period were Iran-related. It's just that the vast majority of them were not authored or retweeted by those in Iran.

As for the second question, whether Twitter was actually used to organize rather than simply publicize the protests, there is even less certainty. Many people who speak Farsi and who have followed the Iranian blogosphere over the years are far more doubtful than outside observers. A prominent Iranian blogger and activist known as Vahid Online, who was in Tehran during the protests, doubts the validity of the

Twitter Revolution thesis simply because few Iranians were tweeting. "Twitter never became very popular in Iran. [But] because the world was watching Iran with such [great interest] during those days, it led many to believe falsely that Iranian people were also getting their news through Twitter," says the blogger.

Twitter was used to post updates about the time and venue of the protests, but it's not clear whether this was done systematically and whether it actually brought in any new crowds onto the streets. That the Green Movement strategically chose Twitter—or, for that matter, any other Internet technology—as their favorite tool of communication is most likely just another myth. On the contrary, the Iranian opposition did not seem to be well-organized, which might explain why it eventually fizzled. "From the beginning, the Green Movement was not created and did not move forward [in an organized manner]—it wasn't like some made a decision and informed others. When you'd walk in the streets, at work, wherever you'd go, people were talking about it and they all wanted to react," says another prominent Iranian blogger, Alireza Rezaei.

The West, however, wasn't hallucinating. Tweets did get sent, and crowds did gather in the streets. This does not necessarily mean, however, that there was a causal link between the two. To put it more metaphorically: If a tree falls in the forest and everyone tweets about it, it may not be the tweets that moved it. Besides, the location and timing of protests were not exactly a secret. One didn't need to go online to notice that there was a big public protest going on in the middle of Tehran. The raging horns of cars stuck in traffic were a pretty good indicator.

In the collective euphoria that overtook the Western media during the events in Iran, dissenting voices—those challenging the dominant account that emphasized the Internet's role in fomenting the protests—received far less prominence than those who cheered the onset of the Twitter Revolution. Annabelle Sreberny, professor of global media and communications at London's School of Oriental and African Studies and an expert on the Iranian media, quickly dismissed Twitter as yet another hype—yet her voice got lost in the rest of the twitter-worshipping commentary. "Twitter was massively overrated. . . . I wouldn't argue that so-

cial media really mobilised Iranians themselves," she told the *Guardian*. Hamid Tehrani, the Persian editor of the blogging network Global Voices, was equally skeptical, speculating that the Twitter Revolution hyperbole revealed more about Western new media fantasies than about the reality in Iran. "The west was focused not on the Iranian people but on the role of western technology," says Tehrani, adding that "Twitter was important in publicising what was happening, but its role was overemphasised."

Many other members of the Iranian diaspora also felt that Twitter was getting far more attention than it deserved. Five days after the protests began, Mehdi Yahyanejad, manager of *Balatarin*, a Los Angeles-based Farsi-language news site similar to Digg.com, told the *Washington Post* that "Twitter's impact inside Iran is zero. . . . Here [in the United States], there is lots of buzz, but once you look . . . you see most of it are Americans tweeting among themselves."

That the Internet may have also had a negative impact on the protest movement was another aspect overlooked by most media commentators. An exception was Golnaz Esfandiari, an Iranian correspondent with Radio Free Europe, who, writing in *Foreign Policy* a year after the 2009 Iranian elections, deplored Twitter's "pernicious complicity in allowing rumors to spread." Esfandiari noticed that "in the early days of the post-election crackdown a rumor quickly spread on Twitter that police helicopters were pouring acid and boiling water on protesters. A year later it remains just that: a rumor."

Esfandiari also noted that the story of the Iranian activist Saeedeh Pouraghay—*who was supposedly arrested for chanting "Allah Akbar" on her rooftop, raped, disfigured, and murdered, becoming the martyr of the Green Movement—which made the rounds on Twitter, turned out to be a hoax. Pouraghay later resurfaced in a broadcast on Iranian state television, saying that she had jumped off a balcony on the night she had been arrested and stayed low for the next few months. A reformist website later claimed that the story of her murder was planted by the Iranian government to discredit reports of other rapes. It's not obvious which side gained more from the hoax and its revelation, but this is exactly the kind of story Western journalists should have been investigating.*

Sadly, in their quest to see Ahmadinejad's regime fall at the mercy of tweets, most journalists preferred to look the other way and produce upbeat copy about the emancipatory nature of the Twitter Revolution. As pundits were competing for airtime and bloggers were competing for eyeballs, few bothered to debunk the overblown claims about the power of the Internet. As a result, the myth of Iran's Twitter Revolution soon joined the gigantic pile of other urban myths about the Internet's mighty potential to topple dictators. This explains how, less than a year after the Iranian protests, a *Newsweek* writer mustered the courage to proclaim that "the revolts in Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Burma, Xinjiang, and Iran could never have happened without the web." (*Newsweek*, it must be noted, has been predicting an Internet-led revolution in Iran since 1995, when it published an article pompously titled "Chatrooms and Chadors" which posited that "if the computer geeks are right, Iran is facing the biggest revolution since the Ayatollah Khomeini.")

Unless journalists fully commit themselves to scrutinizing and, if necessary, debunking such myths, the latter risk having a corrosive effect on policymaking. As long as Twitter is presumed to have been instrumental in enabling the Iranian protests, any technologies that would allow Iranians to access Twitter by bypassing their government's censorship are also presumed to be of exceptional importance. When a newspaper like the *Washington Post* makes a case for allocating more funding to such technologies in one of its editorials, as it did in July 2010, by arguing that "investing in censorship-circumvention techniques like those that powered Tehran's 'Twitter revolution' in June 2009 could have a tremendous, measurable impact," it's a much weaker argument than appears at first glance. (The *Post's* claim that the impact of such technologies could be "measurable" deserves close scrutiny as well.) Similarly, one should start worrying about the likely prominence of the Internet in American foreign policy on hearing Alec Ross, Hillary Clinton's senior adviser for innovation, assert that "social media played a key role in organizing the [Iranian] protests," a claim that is not very different from what Andrew Sullivan declared in June 2009. Even though Ross said this almost a year after Sullivan's hypothetical

conjecture, he still cited no evidence to back up this claim. (In July 2010 Ross inadvertently revealed his own hypocrisy by also proclaiming that "there is very little information to support the claim that Facebook or Twitter or text messaging caused the rioting or can inspire an uprising.")

Where Are the Weapons of Mass Construction?

If the exalted reaction to the Iranian protests is of any indication, Western policymakers are getting lost in the mists of cyber-utopianism, a quasi-religious belief in the power of the Internet to do supernatural things, from eradicating illiteracy in Africa to organizing all of the world's information, and one of the central beliefs of the Google Doctrine. Opening up closed societies and flushing them with democracy juice until they shed off their authoritarian skin is just one of the high expectations placed on the Internet these days. It's not surprising that a 2010 op-ed in the *Guardian* even proposed to "bombard Iran with broadband"; the Internet is seen as mightier than the bomb. Cyber-utopianism seems to be everywhere these days: T-shirts urging policymakers to "drop tweets, not bombs"—a bold slogan for any modern-day antiwar movement—are already on sale online, while in 2009 one of the streets in a Palestinian refugee camp was even named after a Twitter account.

Tweets, of course, don't topple governments; people do (in a few exceptional cases, the Marines and the CIA can do just fine). Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* has ridiculed the mythical power of the Internet to accomplish what even the most advanced military in the world has so much difficulty accomplishing in Iraq and Afghanistan: "Why did we have to send an army when we could have liberated them the same way we buy shoes?" Why, indeed? The joke is lost on Daniel Kimmage, a senior analyst with Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, who argues that "unfettered access to a free Internet is . . . a very practical means of countering Al Qaeda. . . . As users increasingly make themselves heard, the ensuing chaos . . . may shake the online edifice of Al Qaeda's totalitarian ideology." Jihad Jane and a whole number of other shady characters

who were recruited to the terrorist cause online would be sad to learn that they did not surf the Web long enough.

By the end of 2009 cyber-utopianism reached new heights, and the Norwegian Nobel Committee did not object when *Wired Italy* (the Italian edition of the popular technology magazine) nominated the Internet for the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, the result of a public campaign by a number of celebrities, ranging from Giorgio Armani to Shirin Ebadi, a previous winner of the Prize. (In 1991, Lennart Meri, the future president of Estonia, nominated Radio Free Europe for the same award for its role in helping to bring an end to the Soviet Union—another interesting parallel with the Cold War era.) Why did the Internet deserve the prize more than Chinese human rights activist Liu Xiaobo, who emerged as the eventual winner of the prize? Justifications given by an assortment of editors of various national editions of *Wired* magazine, the official printing organ of the Church of Cyber-Utopianism, are symptomatic of the kind of discourse that led American diplomats astray in Iran.

Riccardo Luna, the editor of the Italian edition, proposed that the Internet is a “first weapon of mass construction, which we can deploy to destroy hate and conflict and to propagate peace and democracy.” Chris Anderson, the editor of the original American edition, opined that while “a Twitter account may be no match for an AK-47 . . . in the long term the keyboard is mightier than the sword.” David Rowan, the editor of the British edition, argued that the Internet “gave all of us the chance to take back the power from governments and multinationals. It made the world a totally transparent place.” And how can a totally transparent world fail to be a more democratic world as well?

Apparently, nothing bad ever happens on the Internet frequented by the editors of *Wired*; even spam could be viewed as the ultimate form of modern poetry. But refusing to acknowledge the Internet’s darker side is like visiting Berkeley, California, cyber-utopian headquarters, and concluding that this is how the rest of America lives as well: diverse, tolerant, sun-drenched, with plenty of organic food and nice wine, and with hordes of lifelong political activists fighting for causes that don’t

even exist yet. But this is not how the rest of America lives, and this is certainly not how the rest of the world lives.

A further clarification might be in order at this point. The border between cyber-utopianism and cyber-naïveté is a blurry one. In fact, the reason why so many politicians and journalists believe in the power of the Internet is because they have not given this subject much thought. Their faith is not the result of a careful examination of how the Internet is being used by dictators or how it is changing the culture of resistance and dissent. On the contrary, most often it’s just unthinking acceptance of conventional wisdom, which posits that since authoritarian governments are censoring the Internet, they must be really afraid of it. Thus, according to this view, the very presence of a vibrant Internet culture greatly increases the odds that such regimes will collapse.

How NASDAQ Will Save the World

Whatever one calls it, this belief in the democratizing power of the Web ruins the public’s ability to assess future and existing policies, not least because it overstates the positive role that corporations play in democratizing the world without subjecting them to the scrutiny they so justly deserve. Such cyber-utopian propensity to only see the bright side was on full display in early 2010, as Google announced it was pulling out of China, fed up with the growing censorship demands of the Chinese government and mysterious cyber-attacks on its intellectual property. But what should have been treated as a purely rational business decision was lauded as a bold move to support “human rights”; that Google did not mind operating in China for more than four years prior to the pull-out was lost on most commentators.

Writing in *Newsweek*, Jacob Weisberg, a prominent American journalist and publisher, called Google’s decision “heroic,” while Senator John Kerry said that “Google is gutsily taking real risk in standing up for principle.” The Internet guru Clay Shirky proclaimed that “what [Google is] exporting isn’t a product or a service, it’s a freedom.” An editorial in the *New Republic* argued that Google, “an organization filled

with American scientists," was heeding the advice of Andrei Sakharov, a famous Russian dissident physicist, who pleaded with his fellow Soviet scientists to "muster sufficient courage and integrity to resist the temptation and the habit of conformity." Sakharov, of course, was not selling snippet-sized advertising, nor was he on first-name terms with the National Security Agency, but the *New Republic* preferred to gloss over such inconsistencies.

Even famed journalist Bob Woodward fell under the sway of cyber-utopianism. Appearing on *Meet the Press*, one of the most popular Sunday morning TV shows in America, in May 2010 Woodward suggested that Google's engineers—"some of these people who have these great minds"—should be called in to fix the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. And if Google could fix the oil spill, couldn't they fix Iran as well? It seems that we are only a couple of op-eds away from having Tom Friedman pronounce that Google, with all their marvelous scanners and databases, should take over the Department of Homeland Security.

Google, of course, is not the only subject of nearly universal admiration. A headline in the *Washington Post* declares, "In Egypt, Twitter Trumps Torture," while an editorial in *Financial Times* praises social networking sites like Facebook as "a challenge to undemocratic societies," concluding that "the next great revolution may begin with a Facebook message." (Whether Facebook also presents a challenge to democratic societies is a subject that the editorial didn't broach.) Jared Cohen, the twenty-seven-year-old member of the State Department's Policy Planning staff who sent the infamous email request to Twitter during the Iranian protests, hails Facebook as "one of the most organic tools for democracy promotion the world has ever seen."

One problem that arises from such enthusiastic acceptance of Internet companies' positive role in abetting the fight against authoritarianism is that it lumps all of them together, blurring the differences in their level of commitment to defending human rights, let alone promoting democracy. Twitter, a company that received wide public admiration during the events in Iran, has refused to join the Global Network Initia-

tive (GNI), an industry-wide pledge by other technology companies—including Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft—to behave in accordance with the laws and standards covering the right to freedom of expression and privacy embedded in internationally recognized documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Facebook, another much admired exporter of digital revolutions, refused to join GNI as well, citing lack of resources, a bizarre excuse for a company with \$800 million in 2009 revenues.

While Twitter and Facebook's refusal to join GNI raised the ire of several American senators, it has not at all reflected on their public image. And their executives are right not to worry. They are, after all, friends with the U.S. State Department; they are invited to private dinners with the secretary of state and are taken on tours of exotic places like Iraq, Mexico, and Russia to boost America's image in the world.

There is more than just tech-savvy American diplomacy on full display during such visits. They also reveal that an American company does not need to make many ethical commitments to be friends with the U.S. government, at least as long as it is instrumental to Washington's foreign policy agenda. After eight years of the Bush administration, which was dominated by extremely secretive public-private partnerships like Dick Cheney's Energy Task Force, such behavior hardly provides a good blueprint for public diplomacy.

Google, despite its membership in the GNI, has much to account for as well, ranging from its increasingly carefree attitude toward privacy—hardly a cause for celebration by dissidents around the world—to its penchant for flaunting its own relationship with the U.S. government. Its much-publicized cooperation with the National Security Agency over the cyber-attacks on its servers in early 2010 was hardly an effective way to convince the Iranian authorities of the nonpolitical nature of Internet activities. There is much to admire about Google, Twitter, and Facebook, but as they begin to play an increasingly important role in mediating foreign policy, "admiration" is not a particularly helpful attitude for any policymaker.

From Milk Shakes to Molotov Cocktails

Jared Cohen's praise of Facebook's organic ability to promote democracy may be just a factual statement. Everything else being equal, a world where so many Chinese and Iranians flock to the services of American technology companies may, indeed, be a world where democracy is more likely to prevail in the long run. It's hard to disagree with this statement, especially if the other alternative is having those users opt for domestic Internet services; those tend to be much more heavily policed and censored.

That said, it's important not to lose sight of the fact that the current situation is not the result of some cunning and extremely successful American strategy to exploit Facebook. Rather, it's the result of both intellectual and market conditions at the time. Until recently, authoritarian governments simply did not give much thought to where their citizens chose to do their email and share their pasta recipes; American companies were often the first to offer their superb services, and most governments did not bother to build any barriers. They may have been piqued by the success of American platforms as opposed to local Internet start-ups, but then their domestic fast food industry was also losing ground to McDonald's; as long as no one could mistake McDonald's vanilla triple-thick shake for a Molotov cocktail, this was not something to worry about.

Nevertheless, once the likes of Jared Cohen start lauding Facebook as an organic tool for promoting democracy, it immediately stops being such. In a sense, the only reason why there was so much laxity in the regulation of Internet services operating in authoritarian states was that their leaders did not make the obvious connection between the business interests of American companies and the political interests of the American government. But as the State Department is trying to harvest the fruits of Silicon Valley's success in the global marketplace, it's inevitable that previously carefree attitudes will give way to increased suspicion. Any explicit moves by American diplomats in this space will be watched closely. Moreover, they will be interpreted according to the prevalent conspiracy theories rather than in light of the stale press releases issued by the State Department to explain its actions.

In July 2010 the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, one of the Chinese government's finest research organizations, published a detailed report about the political implications of the Internet. It argued that social networking sites threaten state security because the United States and other Western countries "are using them to foment instability." It's hard not to see this as a direct response to the words and deeds of Jared Cohen. (The Chinese report did cite unnamed U.S. officials as saying that social networking is an "invaluable tool" for overthrowing foreign government and made good use of the U.S. government's involvement via Twitter in the Iranian unrest of 2009.) When American diplomats call Facebook a tool of democracy promotion, it's safe to assume that the rest of the world believes that America is keen to exploit this tool to its fullest potential rather than just stare at it in awe.

American diplomats have been wrong to treat the Internet, revolutionary as it might seem to them, as a space free of national prejudices. Cyberspace is far less susceptible to policy amnesia than they believe; earlier policy blunders and a long-running history of mutual animosity between the West and the rest won't be forgotten so easily. Even in the digital age, the foreign policy of a country is still constrained by the same set of rather unpleasant barriers that limited it in the analog past. As Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane, two leading scholars of international relations, pointed out more than a decade ago, "information does not flow in a vacuum but in a political space that is already occupied." Until the events in Iran, America's technology giants may have, indeed, functioned in a mostly apolitical vacuum and have been spared any bias that comes with the label "American." Such days, however, are clearly over. In the long run, refusing to recognize this new reality will only complicate the job of promoting democracy.

Why Hipsters Make Better Revolutions

In the case of Iran, Western policymakers not only misread the Internet but bragged about their own ignorance to anyone who would listen. Much to their surprise, the Iranian government believed their bluff and took aggressive countermeasures, making the job of using the Web to

foster social and political change in Iran and other closed societies considerably harder. The opportunities of three years ago, when governments still thought that bloggers were mere hipsters, amusing but ultimately dismissed as a serious political movement, are no longer available. Bloggers, no longer perceived as trendy slackers, are seen as the new Solidarity activists—an overly idealistic and probably wrong characterization shared by democratic and authoritarian governments alike.

Most disturbingly, a dangerous self-negating prophecy is at work here: The more Western policymakers talk up the threat that bloggers pose to authoritarian regimes, the more likely those regimes are to limit the maneuver space where those bloggers operate. In some countries, such politicization may be for the better, as blogging would take on a more explicit political role, with bloggers enjoying the status of journalists or human rights defenders. But in many other countries such politicization may only stifle the nascent Internet movement, which could have been far more successful if its advocacy were limited to pursuing social rather than political ends. Whether the West needs to politicize blogging and view it as a natural extension of dissident activity is certainly a complex question that merits broad public debate. But the fact that this debate is not happening at the moment does not mean that blogging is not being politicized, often to the point of no return, by the actions—as well as declarations—of Western policymakers.

Furthermore, giving in to cyber-utopianism may preclude policymakers from considering a whole range of other important questions. Should they applaud or bash technology companies who choose to operate in authoritarian regimes, bending their standard procedures as a result? Are they harbingers of democracy, as they claim to be, or just digital equivalents of Halliburton and United Fruit Company, cynically exploiting local business opportunities while also strengthening the governments that let them in? How should the West balance its sudden urge to promote democracy via the Internet with its existing commitments to other nondigital strategies for achieving the same objective, from the fostering of independent political parties to the development

of civil society organizations? What are the best ways of empowering digital activists without putting them at risk? If the Internet is really a revolutionary force that could nudge all authoritarian regimes toward democracy, should the West go quiet on many of its other concerns about the Internet—remember all those fears about cyberwar, cybercrime, online child pornography, Internet piracy—and strike while the iron is still hot?

These are immensely difficult questions; they are also remarkably easy to answer incorrectly. While the Internet has helped to decrease costs for nearly everything, human folly is a commodity that still bears a relatively high price. The oft-repeated mantra of the open source movement—“fail often, fail early”—produces excellent software, but it is not applicable to situations where human lives are at stake. Western policymakers, unlike pundits and academics, simply don’t have the luxury of getting it wrong and dealing with the consequences later.

From the perspective of authoritarian governments, the costs of exploiting Western follies have significantly decreased as well. Compromising the security of just one digital activist can mean compromising the security—names, faces, email addresses—of everyone that individual knows. Digitization of information has also led to its immense centralization: One stolen password now opens data doors that used not to exist (just how many different kinds of data—not to mention people—would your email password give access to, if compromised?).

Unbridled cyber-utopianism is an expensive ideology to maintain because authoritarian governments don’t stand still and there are absolutely no guarantees they won’t find a way to turn the Internet into a powerful tool of oppression. If, on closer examination, it turns out that the Internet has also empowered the secret police, the censors, and the propaganda offices of a modern authoritarian regime, it’s quite likely that the process of democratization will become harder, not easier. Similarly, if the Internet has dampened the level of antigovernment sentiment—because people have acquired access to cheap and almost infinite digital entertainment or because they feel they need the government to protect them from the lawlessness of cyberspace—it certainly gives the regime

yet another source of legitimacy. If the Internet is reshaping the very nature and culture of antigovernment resistance and dissent, shifting it away from real-world practices and toward anonymous virtual spaces, it will also have significant consequences for the scale and tempo of the protest movement, not all of them positive.

That's an insight that has been lost on most observers of the political power of the Internet. Refusing to acknowledge that the Web can actually strengthen rather than undermine authoritarian regimes is extremely irresponsible and ultimately results in bad policy, if only because it gives policymakers false confidence that the only things they need to be doing are proactive—rather than reactive—in nature. But if, on careful examination, it turns out that certain types of authoritarian regimes can benefit from the Internet in disproportionately more ways than their opponents, the focus of Western democracy promotion work should shift from empowering the activists to topple their regimes to countering the governments' own exploitation of the Web lest they become even more authoritarian. There is no point in making a revolution more effective, quick, and anonymous if the odds of the revolution's success are worsening in the meantime.

In Search of a Missing Handle

So far, most policymakers choose to be sleepwalking through this digital minefield, whistling their favorite cyber-utopian tunes and refusing to confront all the evidence. They have also been extremely lucky because the mines were far and few between. This is not an attitude they can afford anymore, if only because the mines are now almost everywhere and, thanks to the growth of the Internet, their explosive power is much greater and has implications that go far beyond the digital realm.

As Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor Boas pointed out in *Open Networks, Closed Regimes*, their pioneering 2003 study about the impact of the pre-Web 2.0 Internet on authoritarianism, "conventional wisdom . . . forms part of the gestalt in which policy is formulated, and a better understanding of the Internet's political effects should lead to better pol-

icy." The inverse is true as well: A poor understanding leads to poor policy.

If the only conclusion about the power of the Internet that Western policymakers have drawn from the Iranian events is that tweets are good for social mobilization, they are not likely to outsmart their authoritarian adversaries, who have so far shown much more sophistication in the online world. It's becoming clear that understanding the full impact of the Internet on the democratization of authoritarian states would require more than just looking at the tweets of Iranian youngsters, for they only tell one part of the story. Instead, one needs to embark on a much more thorough and complex analysis that would look at the totality of forces shaped by the Web.

Much of the current cognitive dissonance is of do-gooders' own making. What did they get wrong? Well, perhaps it was a mistake to treat the Internet as a deterministic one-directional force for either global liberation or oppression, for cosmopolitanism or xenophobia. The reality is that the Internet will enable all of these forces—as well as many others—simultaneously. But as far as laws of the Internet go, this is all we know. Which of the numerous forces unleashed by the Web will prevail in a particular social and political context is impossible to tell without first getting a thorough theoretical understanding of that context.

Likewise, it is naïve to believe that such a sophisticated and multipurpose technology as the Internet could produce identical outcomes—whether good or bad—in countries as diverse as Belarus, Burma, Kazakhstan, and Tunisia. There is so much diversity across modern authoritarian regimes that some Tolstoy paraphrasing might be in order: While all free societies are alike, each unfree society is unfree in its own way. Statistically, it's highly unlikely that such disparate entities would all react to such a powerful stimulus in the same way. To argue that the Internet would result in similar change—that is, democratization—in countries like Russia and China is akin to arguing that globalization, too, would also exert the same effect on them; more than a decade into the new century, such deterministic claims seem highly suspicious.

It is equally erroneous to assume that authoritarianism rests on brutal force alone. Religion, culture, history, and nationalism are all potent forces that, with or without the Internet, shape the nature of modern authoritarianism in ways that no one fully understands yet. In some cases, they undermine it; in many others, they enable it. Anyone who believes in the power of the Internet as I do should resist the temptation to embrace Internet-centrism and unthinkingly assume that, under the pressure of technology, all of these complex forces will evolve in just one direction, making modern authoritarian regimes more open, more participatory, more decentralized, and, all along, more conducive to democracy. The Internet does matter, but we simply don't know how it matters. This fact, paradoxically, only makes it matter even more: The costs of getting it wrong are tremendous. What's clear is that few insights would be gained by looking inward—that is, trying to crack the logic of the Internet; its logic can never be really understood outside the context in which it manifests itself.

Of course, such lack of certainty does not make the job of promoting democracy in the digital age any easier. But, at minimum, it would help if policymakers—and the public at large—free themselves of any intellectual obstacles and biases that may skew their thinking and result in utopian theorizing that has little basis in reality. The hysterical reaction to the protests in Iran has revealed that the West clearly lacks a good working theory about the impact of the Internet on authoritarianism. This is why policymakers, in a desperate attempt to draw at least some lessons about technology and democratization, subject recent events like the overthrow of communist regimes in Eastern Europe to some rather twisted interpretation. Whatever the theoretical merits of such historical parallels, policymakers should remember that all frameworks have consequences: One poorly chosen historical analogy, and the entire strategy derived from it can go to waste.

Nevertheless, while it may be impossible to produce many generalizable laws to describe the relationship between the Internet and political regimes, policymakers shouldn't simply stop thinking about these issues, commission a number of decade-long studies, and wait until the results are in. This is not a viable option. As the Internet gets more com-

plex, so do its applications—and authoritarian regimes are usually quick to put them to good use. The longer the indecision, the greater are the odds that some of the existing opportunities for Internet-enabled action will soon no longer be available.

This is not to deny that, once mastered, the Internet could be a powerful tool in the arsenal of a policymaker; in fact, once such mastery is achieved, it would certainly be irresponsible not to deploy this tool. But as Langdon Winner, one of the shrewdest thinkers about the political implications of modern technology, once observed, “although virtually limitless in their power, our technologies are tools without handles.” The Internet is, unfortunately, no exception. The handle that overconfident policymakers feel in their hands is just an optical illusion; theirs is a false mastery. They don't know how to tap into the power of the Internet, nor can they anticipate the consequences of their actions. In the meantime, all their awkward moments add up and, as was the case in Iran, have dire consequences.

Most of the Western efforts to use the Internet in the fight against authoritarianism could best be described as trying to apply a poor cure to the wrong disease. Policymakers have little control over their cure, which keeps mutating every day, so it never works the way they expect it to. (The lack of a handle does not help either.) The disease part is even more troublesome. The kind of authoritarianism they really want to fight expired in 1989. Today, however, is no 1989, and the sooner policymakers realize this, the sooner they can start crafting Internet policies that are better suited for the modern world.

The upside is that even tools without handles can be of some limited use in any household. One just needs to treat them as such and search for contexts where they are needed. At minimum, one should ensure that such tools don't hurt anyone who tries to use them with the assumption of inevitable mastery. Until policymakers come to terms with the fact that their Internet predicament is driven by such highly uncertain dynamics, they will never succeed in harvesting the Web's mighty potential.

chapter two

Texting Like It's 1989



The history of cyber-utopianism is not very eventful, but the date January 21, 2010, has a guaranteed place in its annals—probably right next to Andrew Sullivan’s blog posts about Twitter’s role in Tehran. For this was the day when the sitting U.S. secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, went to the Newseum, America’s finest museum of news and journalism, to deliver a seminal speech about Internet freedom and thus acknowledge the Internet’s prominent role in foreign affairs.

The timing of Clinton’s speech could not have been better. Just a week earlier, Google announced it was considering pulling out of China—hinting that the Chinese government may have had something to do with it—so everyone was left guessing if the issue would get a mention (it did). One could feel palpable excitement all over Washington: An American commitment to promoting Internet freedom promised a new line of work for entire families in this town. All the usual suspects—policy analysts, lobbyists, consultants—were eagerly anticipating the opening salvo of this soon-to-be-lavishly-funded “war for Internet freedom.” For Washington, it was the kind of universally admired quest for global justice that could allow think tanks to churn out

a slew of in-depth research studies, defense contractors to design a number of cutting-edge censorship-breaking technologies, and NGOs to conduct a series of risky trainings in the most exotic locales on Earth. This is why Washington beats any other city in the world, including Iran and Beijing, in terms of how often and how many of its residents search for the term "Internet freedom" on Google. A campaign to promote Internet freedom is a genuinely Washingtonian phenomenon.

But there was also something distinctively unique about this gathering. It's not very often that the Beltway's BlackBerry mafia—the buttoned-up think-tankers and policy wonks—get to share a room with the iPhone fanboys—the unkempt and chronically underdressed entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley. Few other events could bring together Larry Diamond, a senior research fellow at the conservative Hoover Institution and a former senior adviser to the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, and Chris "FactoryJoe" Messina, the twenty-nine-year-old cheerleader of Web 2.0 and Google's "Open Web Advocate" (that's his official job title!). It was a "geeks + wonks" feast.

The speech itself did not offer many surprises; its objective was to establish "Internet freedom" as a new priority for American foreign policy, and judging by the buzz that Clinton's performance generated in the media, that objective was accomplished, even if specific details were never divulged. The generalizations drawn by Clinton were rather upbeat—"information freedom supports the peace and security that provide a foundation for global progress"—and so were her prescriptions: "We need to put these tools in the hands of people around the world who will use them to advance democracy and human rights." There were too many buzzwords—"deficiencies in the current market for innovation," "harnessing the power of connection technologies," "long-term dividends from modest investments in innovation"—but such, perhaps, was the cost of trying to look cool in front of the Silicon Valley audience.

Excessive optimism and empty McKinsey-speak aside, it was Clinton's creative use of recent history that really stood out. Clinton drew a parallel between the challenges of promoting Internet freedom and the experiences of supporting dissidents during the Cold War. Speak-

ing of her recent visit to Germany to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Clinton mentioned "the courageous men and women" who "made the case against oppression by circulating small pamphlets called samizdat," which "helped pierce the concrete and concertina wire of the Iron Curtain." (Newseum was a very appropriate venue to give in to Cold War nostalgia. It happens to house the largest display of sections of the Berlin Wall outside of Germany).

Something very similar is happening today, argued Clinton, adding that "as networks spread to nations around the globe, virtual walls are cropping up in place of visible walls." And as "a new information curtain is descending across much of the world . . . viral videos and blog posts are becoming the samizdat of our day." Even though Clinton did not articulate many policy objectives, they were not hard to guess from her chosen analogy. Virtual walls are to be pierced, information curtains are to be raised, digital samizdat is to be supported and disseminated, and bloggers are to be celebrated as dissidents.

As far as Washington was concerned, having Clinton utter that highly seductive phrase—"a new information curtain"—in the same breath as the Berlin Wall was tantamount to announcing a sequel to the Cold War in 3D. She tapped into the secret desires of many policymakers, who had been pining for an enemy they understood, someone unlike that bunch of bearded and cave-bound men from Waziristan who showed little appreciation for balance-of-power theorizing and seemed to occupy so much of the present agenda.

It was Ronald Reagan's lieutenants who must have felt particularly excited. Having claimed victory in the analog Cold War, they felt well-prepared to enlist—nay, triumph—in its digital equivalent. But it was certainly not the word "Internet" that made Internet freedom such an exciting issue for this group. As such, the quest for destroying the world's cyber-walls has given this aging generation of cold warriors, increasingly out of touch with a world beset by problems like climate change or the lack of financial regulation, something of a lifeline. Not that those other modern problems are unimportant—they are simply not existential enough, compared to the fight against communism. For

many members of this rapidly shrinking Cold War lobby, the battle for Internet freedom is their last shot at staging a major intellectual comeback. After all, whom else would the public call on but them, the tireless and self-deprecating statesmen who helped rid the world of all those other walls and curtains?

WWW & W

It only took a few months for one such peculiar group of Washington insiders to convene a high-profile conference to discuss how a host of Cold War policies—and particularly Western support for Soviet dissidents—could be recovered from the dustbin of history and applied to the current situation. Spearheaded by George W. Bush, who, by then, had mostly retreated from the public arena, the gathering attracted a number of hawkish neoconservatives. Perhaps out of sheer disgust with the lackluster foreign policy record of the Obama administration, they had decided to wage their own fight for freedom on the Internet.

There was, of course, something surreal about George W. Bush, who was rather dismissive of the “Internets” while in office, presiding over this Internet-worship club. But then, for Bush at least, this meeting had little to do with the Web per se. Rather, its goal was to push the “freedom agenda” into new, digital territories. Seeing the internet as an ally, Bush, always keen to flaunt his credentials as the dissidents’ best friend—he met more than a hundred of them while in office—agreed to host a gathering of what he called “global cyber-dissidents” in, of all places, Texas. Featuring half a dozen political bloggers from countries like Syria, Cuba, Colombia, and Iran, the conference was one of the first major public events organized by the newly inaugurated George W. Bush Institute. The pomposity of its lineup, with panels like “Freedom Stories from the Front Lines” and “Global Lessons in eFreedom,” suggested that even two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, its veterans are still fluent in Manichean rhetoric.

But the Texas conference was not just a gathering of disgruntled and unemployed neoconservatives; respected Internet experts, like Ethan Zuckerman and Hal Roberts of Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet

and Society, were in attendance as well. A senior official from the State Department—technically an Obama man—was also dispatched to Texas. “This conference highlights the work of a new generation of dissidents in the hope that it will become a beacon to others,” said James Glassman, a former high-profile official in the Bush administration and the president of the George W. Bush Institute, on opening the event. According to Glassman, the conference aimed “to identify trends in effective cyber communication that spread human freedom and advance human rights.” (Glassman, it must be said, is to cyber-utopianism what Thoreau is to civil disobedience; he famously coauthored a book called *Dow 36,000*, predicting that the Dow Jones was on its way toward a new height; it came out a few months before the dot-com bubble burst in 2000.)

David Keyes, a director of a project called Cyberdissidents.org, was one of the keynote speakers at the Bush event, serving as a kind of bridge to the world of the old Soviet dissidents. He used to work with Natan Sharansky, a prominent Soviet dissident whose thinking shaped much of the Bush administration’s global quest for freedom. (Sharansky’s *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror* was one of the few books Bush read during his time in office; it exerted a significant influence, as Bush himself acknowledged: “If you want a glimpse of how I think about foreign policy read Natan Sharansky’s book. . . . Read it. It’s a great book.”) According to Keyes, the mission of Cyberdissidents.org is to “make the Middle East’s pro-democracy Internet activists famous and beloved in the West”—that is, to bring them to Sharansky’s level of fame (the man himself sits on Cyberdissidents’s board of advisers).

But one shouldn’t jump to conclusions too hastily. The “cyber-cons” that attended the Texas meeting are not starry-eyed utopians, who think that the Internet will magically rid the world of dictators. On the contrary, they eagerly acknowledge—much more so than the liberals in the Obama administration—that authoritarian governments are also active on the Internet. “Democracy is not just a tweet away,” writes Jeffrey Gedmin, the president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and another high-profile attendee at the event (a Bush appointee, he enjoys stellar

conservative credentials, including a senior position at the American Enterprise Institute). That the cyber-cons happen to believe in the power of bloggers to topple those governments is not a sign of cyber-utopianism; rather it's the result of the general neoconservative outlook on how authoritarian societies function and on the role that dissidents—both online and offline varieties—play in transforming them. Granted, shades of utopianism are easily discernible in their vision, but this is not utopianism about technology; this is utopianism about politics in general.

The Iraqi experience may have somewhat curbed their enthusiasm, but the neoconservative belief that all societies aspire to democracy and would inevitably head in its direction—if only all the obstacles were removed—is as strong as ever. The cyber-cons may have been too slow to realize the immense potential of the Internet in accomplishing their agenda; in less than two decades it removed more such obstacles than all neocon policies combined. But now that authoritarian governments were also actively moving into this space, it was important to stop them. For most attendees at the Bush gathering, the struggle for Internet freedom was quickly emerging as the quintessential issue of the new century, the one that could help them finish the project that Ronald Reagan began in the 1980s and that Bush did his best to advance in the first decade of the new century. It seems that in the enigma of Internet freedom, neoconservatism, once widely believed to be on the wane, has found a new *raison d'être*—and a new lease on life to go along with it.

Few exemplify the complex intellectual connections between Cold War history, neoconservatism, and the brave new world of Internet freedom better than Mark Palmer. Cofounder of the National Endowment for Democracy, the Congress-funded leading democracy-promoting organization in the world, Palmer served as Ronald Reagan's ambassador to Hungary during the last years of communism. He is thus well-informed about the struggles of the Eastern European dissidents; he is equally knowledgeable about the ways in which the West nurtured them, for a lot of that support passed through the U.S. embassy. Today Palmer, a member of the uber-hawkish Committee on the Present Danger, has emerged as a leading advocate of Internet freedom, mostly on

behalf of Falun Gong, a persecuted spiritual group from China, which is one of the most important behind-the-scenes players in the burgeoning industry of Internet freedom. Falun Gong runs several websites that were banned once the group fell out with the Chinese government in 1999. Hence its practitioners have built an impressive fleet of technologies to bypass China's numerous firewalls, making the banned sites accessible from within the country. Palmer has penned passionate pleas—including congressional testimonies—demanding that the U.S. government allocate more funding to Falun Gong's sprawling technology operation to boost their capacity and make their technology available in other repressive countries. (The U.S. State Department turned down at least one such request, but then in May 2010, under growing pressure from Falun Gong's numerous supporters, including conservative outfits like the Hudson Institute and the editorial pages of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, it relented, granting \$1.5 million to the group.)

Palmer's views about the promise of the Internet epitomize the cyber-con position at its hawkish extreme. In his 2003 book *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil: How to Oust the World's Last Dictators by 2025*, his guide to overthrowing forty-five of the world's authoritarian leaders, a book that makes Dick Cheney look like a dove, Palmer lauded the emancipatory power of the Internet, calling it "a force multiplier for democracy and an expense multiplier for dictators." For him, the Internet is an excellent way to foster civil unrest that can eventually result in a revolution: "Internet skills are readily taught, and should be, by the outside democracies. Few undertakings are more cost effective than 'training the trainers' for Internet organizing." The Web is thus a powerful tool for regime change; pro-democracy activists in authoritarian states should be taught how to blog and tweet in more or less the same fashion that they are taught to practice civil disobedience and street protest—the two favorite themes of U.S.-funded trainings whose agendas are heavily influenced by the work of the American activist-academic Gene Sharp, the so-called Machiavelli of nonviolence.

With regard to Iran, for example, one of Palmer's proposed solutions is to turn diplomatic missions of "democratic states" into "freedom

houses, providing to Iranians cybercafés with access to the Internet and other communications equipment, as well as safe rooms for meetings." But Palmer's love for freedom houses goes well beyond Iran. He is a board member and a former vice chair of Freedom House, another mostly conservative outfit that specializes in tracking democratization across the world and, when an opportune moment comes along, helping to spread it. (Because of their supposed role in fomenting Ukraine's Orange Revolution, Freedom House and George Soros's Open Society Foundations are two of the Kremlin's favorite Western bogeymen.) Perhaps in part thanks to pressure from Palmer, Freedom House has recently expanded its studies of democratization into the digital domain, publishing a report on the Internet freedom situation in fifteen countries and, with some financial backing by the U.S. government, has even set up a dedicated Internet Freedom Initiative. Whatever its emancipatory potential, the Internet will remain Washington's favorite growth industry for years to come.

Cyber Cold War

But it would be disingenuous to suggest that it's only neoconservatives who like delving into their former glory to grapple with the digital world. That the intellectual legacy of the Cold War can be repurposed to better understand the growing host of Internet-related emerging problems is an assumption widely shared across the American political spectrum. "To win the cyber-war, look to the Cold War," writes Mike McConnell, America's former intelligence chief. "[The fight for Internet freedom] is a lot like the problem we had during the Cold War," concurs Ted Kaufman, a Democratic senator from Delaware. Freud would have had a good laugh on seeing how the Internet, a highly resilient network designed by the U.S. military to secure communications in case of an attack by the Soviet Union, is at pains to get over its Cold War parentage. Such intellectual recycling is hardly surprising. The fight against communism has supplied the foreign policy establishment with so many buzzwords and metaphors—the Iron Curtain, the Evil Empire, Star Wars, the Missile Gap—that many of them could be raised from

the dead today—simply by adding the annoying qualifiers like "cyber-," "digital," and "2.0."

By the virtue of sharing part of its name with the word "firewall," the Berlin Wall is by far the most abused term from the vocabulary of the Cold War. Senators are particularly fond of the metaphorical thinking that it inspires. Arlen Specter, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, has urged the American government to "fight fire with fire in finding ways to breach these firewalls, which dictatorships use to control their people and keep themselves in power." Why? Because "tearing down these walls can match the effect of what happened when the Berlin Wall was torn down." Speaking in October 2009 Sam Brownback, a Republican senator from Kansas, argued that "as we approach the 20th anniversary of the breaking of the Berlin Wall, we must . . . commit ourselves to finding ways to tear down . . . the cyber-walls." It feels as if Ronald Reagan's speechwriters are back in town, churning out speeches about the Internet.

European politicians are equally poetic. Carl Bildt, a former prime minister of Sweden, believes that dictatorships are fighting a losing battle because "cyber walls are as certain to fall as the walls of concrete once did." And even members of predominantly liberal NGOs cannot resist the temptation. "As in the cold war [when] you had an Iron Curtain, there is concern that authoritarian governments . . . are developing a Virtual Curtain," says Arvind Ganesan of Human Rights Watch.

Journalists, always keen to sacrifice nuance in the name of supposed clarity, are the worst abusers of Cold War history for the purpose of explaining the imperative to promote Internet freedom to their audience. Roger Cohen, a foreign affairs columnist for the *International Herald Tribune*, writes that while "Tear down this wall!" was a twentieth-century cry, the proper cry for the twenty-first century is "Tear down this firewall!" *Foreign Affairs'* David Feith argues that "just as East Germans diminished Soviet legitimacy by escaping across Checkpoint Charlie, 'hacktivists' today do the same by breaching Internet cyberwalls." And to dispel any suspicions that such linguistic promiscuity could be a mere coincidence, Eli Lake, a contributing editor for the *New Republic*, opines that "during the cold war, the dominant metaphor for describing the repression of totalitarian regimes was The Berlin Wall. To update

that metaphor, we should talk about The Firewall," as if the similarity between the two cases was nothing but self-evident.

Things get worse once observers begin to develop what they think are informative and insightful parallels that go beyond the mere pairing of the Berlin Wall with the Firewall, attempting to establish a nearly functional identity between some of the activities and phenomena of the Cold War era and those of today's Internet. This is how blogging becomes samizdat (Columbia University's Lee Bollinger proclaims that "like the underground samizdat . . . the Web has allowed free speech to avoid the reach of the most authoritarian regimes"); bloggers become dissidents (Alec Ross, Hillary Clinton's senior adviser for innovation, says that "bloggers are a form of 21st century dissident"); and the Internet itself becomes a new and improved platform for Western broadcasting (New York University's Clay Shirky argues that what the Internet allows in authoritarian states "is way more threatening than Voice of America"). Since the Cold War vocabulary so profoundly affects how Western policymakers conceptualize the Internet and measure its effectiveness as a policy instrument, it's little wonder that so many of them are impressed. Blogs are, indeed, more efficient at spreading banned information than photocopiers.

The origins of the highly ambitious cyber-con agenda are thus easy to pin down; anyone who takes all these metaphors seriously, whatever the ideology, would inevitably be led to believe that the Internet is a new battleground for freedom and that, as long as Western policymakers could ensure that the old cyber-walls are destroyed and no new ones are erected in their place, authoritarianism is doomed.

Nostalgia's Lethal Metaphors

But perhaps there is no need to be so dismissive of the Cold War experience. After all, it's a relatively recent battle, still fresh in the minds of many people working on issues of Internet freedom today. Plenty of information-related aspects of the Cold War—think radio-jamming—bear at least some minor technical resemblance to today's concerns

about Internet censorship. Besides, it's inevitable that decision makers in any field, not just politics, would draw on their prior experiences to understand any new problems they confront, even if they might adjust some of their previous conclusions in light of new facts. The world of foreign policy is simply too complex to be understood without borrowing concepts and ideas that originate elsewhere; it's inevitable that decision makers will use metaphors in explaining or justifying their actions. That said, it's important to ensure that the chosen metaphors actually introduce—rather than reduce—conceptual clarity. Otherwise, these are not metaphors but highly deceptive sound bites.

All metaphors come with costs, for the only way in which they can help us grasp a complex issue is by downplaying some other, seemingly less important, aspects of that issue. Thus, the theory of the "domino effect," so popular during the Cold War, predicted that once a country goes communist, other countries would soon follow—until the entire set of dominoes (countries) has fallen. While this may have helped people grasp the urgent need to respond to communism, this metaphor overemphasized interdependence between countries while paying little attention to internal causes of instability. It downplayed the possibility that democratic governments can fall on their own, without external influence. But that, of course, only became obvious in hindsight. One major problem with metaphors, no matter how creative they are, is that once they enter into wider circulation, few people pay attention to other aspects of the problem that were not captured by the original metaphor. (Ironically, it was in Eastern Europe, as communist governments began collapsing one after another, that a "domino effect" actually seemed to occur.) "The pitfall of metaphorical reasoning is that people often move from the identification of similarities to the assumption of identity—that is, they move from the realization that something is *like* something else to assuming that something is *exactly like* something else. The problem stems from using metaphors as a substitute for new thought rather than a spur to creative thought," writes Keith Shimko, a scholar of political psychology at Purdue University. Not surprisingly, metaphors often create an illusion of complete intellectual mastery of an

issue, giving decision makers a false sense of similarity where there is none.

The carefree way in which Western policymakers are beginning to throw around metaphors like "virtual walls" or "information curtains" is disturbing. Not only do such metaphors play up only certain aspects of the "Internet freedom" challenge (for example, the difficulty of sending critical messages into the target country), they also downplay other aspects (the fact that the Web can be used by the very government of the target country for the purposes of surveillance or propaganda). Such metaphors also politicize anyone on the receiving end of the information coming from the other side of the "wall" or "curtain"; such recipients are almost automatically presumed to be pro-Western or, at least, to have some serious criticisms of their governments. Why would they be surreptitiously lifting the curtain otherwise?

Having previously expended so much time and effort on trying to break the Iron Curtain, Western policymakers would likely miss more effective methods to break the Information Curtain; their previous experience makes them see everything in terms of curtains that need to be lifted rather than, say, fields that need to be watered. Anyone tackling the issue unburdened by that misleading analogy would have spotted that it's a "field" not a "wall" that they are looking at. Policymakers' previous experiences with solving similar problems, however, block them from seeking more effective solutions to new problems. This is a well-known phenomenon that psychologists call the *Einstellung Effect*.

Many of the Cold War metaphors suggest solutions of their own. Walls need to be destroyed and curtains raised before democracy can take root. That democracy may still fail to take root even if the virtual walls are crushed is not a scenario that naturally follows from such metaphors, if only because the peaceful history of postcommunist Eastern Europe suggests otherwise. By infusing policymakers with excessive optimism, the Cold War metaphors thus result in a certain illusory sense of finality and irreversibility. Breaching a powerful firewall is in no way similar to the breaching of the Berlin Wall or the lifting of passport controls at Checkpoint Charlie, simply because patching firewalls,

unlike rebuilding monumental walls, takes hours. Physical walls are cheaper to destroy than to build; their digital equivalents work the other way around. Likewise, the "cyber-wall" metaphor falsely suggests that once digital barriers are removed, new and completely different barriers won't spring up in their place—a proposition that is extremely misleading when Internet control takes on multiple forms and goes far beyond the mere blocking of websites.

Once such language creeps into policy analysis, it can result in a severe misallocation of resources. Thus, when an editorial in the *Washington Post* argues that "once there are enough holes in a firewall, it crumbles. The technology for this exists. What is needed is more capacity," it's a statement that, while technically true, is extremely deceptive. More capacity may, indeed, temporarily pierce the firewalls, but it is no guarantee that other, firewall-free approaches won't do the same job more effectively. To continue using the cyber-wall metaphor is to fall victim to extreme Internet-centrism, unable to see the sociopolitical nature of the problem of Internet control and focus only on its technological side.

Nowhere is the language problem more evident than in the popular discourse about China's draconian system of Internet control. Ever since a 1997 article in *Wired* magazine dubbed this system "the Great Firewall of China," most Western observers have relied on such mental imagery to conceptualize both the problem and the potential solutions. In the meantime, other important aspects of Internet control in the country—particularly the growing self-policing of China's own Internet companies and the rise of a sophisticated online propaganda apparatus—did not receive as much attention. According to Lokman Tsui, an Internet scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, "[the metaphor of] the 'Great Firewall' . . . limits our understanding and subsequent policy design on China's internet. . . . If we want to make a start at understanding the internet in China in all its complexity, the first step we need to take is to think beyond the Great Firewall that still has its roots in the Cold War." Tsui's advice is worth heeding, but as long as policymakers continue their collective exercise in Cold War nostalgia, it is not going to happen.

Why Photocopiers Don't Blog

Anachronistic language skewers public understanding of many other domains of Internet culture, resulting in ineffective and even counter-productive policies. The similarities between the Internet and technologies used for samizdat—fax machines and photocopiers—are fewer than one might imagine. A piece of samizdat literature copied on a smuggled photocopier had only two uses: to be read and to be passed on. But the Internet is, by definition, a much more complex medium that can serve an infinite number of purposes. Yes, it can be used to pass on antigovernment information, but it can also be used to spy on citizens, satisfy their hunger for entertainment, subject them to subtle propaganda, and even launch cyber-attacks on the Pentagon. No decisions made about the regulation of faxes or photocopiers in Washington had much impact on their users in Hungary or Poland; in contrast, plenty of decisions about blogs and social networking sites—made in Brussels, Washington, or Silicon Valley—have an impact on all the users in China and Iran.

Similarly, the problem with understanding blogging through the lens of samizdat is that it obfuscates many of the regime-strengthening features and entrenches the utopian myth of the Internet as a liberator. There was hardly any pro-government samizdat in the Soviet Union (even though there was plenty of samizdat accusing the government of violating the core principles of Marxism-Leninism). If someone wanted to express a position in favor of the government, they could write a letter to the local newspapers or raise it at the next meeting of their party cell. Blogs, on the other hand, come in all shapes and ideologies; there are plenty of pro-government blogs in Iran, China, and Russia, many of them run by people who are genuinely supportive of the regime (or at least some of its features, like foreign policy). To equate blogging with samizdat and bloggers with dissidents is to close one's eyes to what's going on in the extremely diverse world of new media across the globe. Many bloggers are actually more extreme in their positions than the government itself. Susan Shirk, an expert on Asian politics and former deputy assistant secretary of state in the Clinton administration, writes that "Chinese officials . . . describe themselves as feeling under

increasing pressure from nationalist public opinion. 'How do you know,' I ask, 'what public opinion actually is?' 'That's easy,' they say, 'I find out from Global Times [a nationalistic state-controlled tabloid about global affairs] and the Internet.' And that public opinion may create an enabling environment for a more assertive government policy, even if the government is not particularly keen on it. "China's popular media and Internet websites sizzle with anti-Japanese vitriol. Stories related to Japan attract more hits than any other news on Internet sites and anti-Japanese petitions are a focal point for organizing on-line collective action," writes Shirk. Nor is the Iranian blogosphere any more tolerant; in late 2006 a conservative blog attacked Ahmadinejad for watching women dancers perform at a sports event abroad.

While it was possible to argue that there was some kind of linear relationship between the amount of samizdat literature in circulation or even the number of dissidents and the prospects for democratization, it's hard to make that argument about blogging and bloggers. By itself, the fact that the number of Chinese or Iranian blogs is increasing does not suggest that democratization is more likely to take root. This is where many analysts fall into the trap of equating liberalization with democratization; the latter, unlike the former, is a process with a clear end result. "Political liberalization entails a widening public sphere and a greater, but not irreversible, degree of basic freedoms. It does not imply the introduction of contestation for positions of effective governing power," write Holger Albrecht and Oliver Schlumberger, two scholars of democratization specializing in the politics of the Middle East. That there are many more voices online may be important, but what really matters is whether those voices eventually lead to any more political participation and, eventually, any more votes. (And even if they do, not all such votes are equally meaningful, for many elections are rigged before they even start.)

Which Tweet Killed the Soviet Union?

But what's most problematic about today's Cold War-inspired conceptualization of Internet freedom is that they are rooted in a shallow and triumphalist reading of the end of the Cold War, a reading that has little

to do with the discipline of history as practiced by historians (as opposed to what is imagined by politicians). It's as if to understand the inner workings of our new and shiny iPads we turned to an obscure nineteenth-century manual of the telegraph written by a pseudoscientist who had never studied physics. To choose the Cold War as a source of guiding metaphors about the Internet is an invitation to conceptual stalemate, if only because the Cold War as a subject matter is so suffused with arguments, inconsistencies, and controversies—and those are growing by the year, as historians gain access to new archives—that it is completely ill-suited for any comparative inquiry, let alone the one that seeks to debate and draft effective policies for the future.

When defenders of Internet freedom fall back on Cold War rhetoric, they usually do it to show the causal connection between information and the fall of communism. The policy implications of such comparisons are easy to grasp as well: Technologies that provide for such increased information flows should be given priority and receive substantial public support.

Notice, for example, how Gordon Crovitz, a *Wall Street Journal* columnist, makes an exaggerated claim about the Cold War—"the Cold War was won by spreading information about the Free World"—before recommending a course of action—"in a world of tyrants scared of their own citizens, the new tools of the Web should be even more terrifying if the outside world makes sure that people have access to its tools." (Crovitz's was an argument in favor of giving more public money to Falun Gong-affiliated Internet groups.) Another 2009 column in the *Journal*, this time penned by former members of the Bush administration, pulls the same trick: "Just as providing photocopies and fax machines helped Solidarity dissidents in communist Poland in the 1980s"—here is the necessary qualifier without which the advice might seem less credible—"grants should be given to private groups to develop and field firewall-busting technology."

These may all be worthwhile policy recommendations, but they rest on a highly original—some historians might say suspicious—interpretation of the Cold War. Because of its unexpected and extremely fast-paced end, it begot all sorts of highly abstract theories about the power of information to transform power itself. That the end of communism

in the East coincided with the beginning of a new stage in the information revolution in the West convinced many people that a monocausal relationship was at work here. The advent of the Internet was only the most obvious breakthrough, but other technologies—above all, the radio—got a lion's share of the credit for the downfall of Soviet communism. "Why did the West win the Cold War?" asks Michael Nelson, former chairman of the Reuters Foundation in his 2003 book about the history of Western broadcasting to the Soviet bloc. "Not by use of arms. Weapons did not breach the Iron Curtain. The Western invasion was by radio, which was mightier than the sword." Autobiographies of radio journalists and executives who were commanding that "invasion" in outposts like Radio Free Europe or the Voice of America are full of such rhetorical bluster; they are clearly not the ones to downplay their own roles in bringing democracy to Eastern Europe.

The person to blame for popularizing such views happens to be the same hero many conservatives widely believe to have won the Cold War itself: Ronald Reagan. Since he was the man in charge of all those Western radio broadcasts and spearheaded the undercover support to samizdat-printing dissidents, any account that links the fall of communism to the role of technology would invariably glorify Reagan's own role in the process. Reagan, however, did not have to wait for future interpretations. Proclaiming that "breezes of electronic beams blow through the Iron Curtain as if it was lace," he started the conversation that eventually degenerated into the dreamy world of "virtual curtains" and "cyber-walls." Once Reagan announced that "information is the oxygen of the modern age" and that "it seeps through the walls topped by barbed wire, it wafts across the electrified borders," pundits, politicians, and think-tankers knew they had a metaphorical treasure trove while Reagan's numerous supporters saw this narrative as finally acknowledging their hero's own gigantic contribution to ushering in democracy into Europe. (China's microchip manufacturers must have been laughing all the way to the bank when Reagan predicted that "the Goliath of totalitarianism will be brought down by the David of the microchip.")

It just took a few months to add analytical luster to Reagan's pronouncements and turn it into something of a coherent history. In 1990, the RAND Corporation, a California-based think tank that, perhaps by

the sheer virtue of its propitious location, never passes up an opportunity to praise the powers of modern technology, reached a strikingly similar conclusion. "The communist bloc failed," it said in a timely published study, "not primarily or even fundamentally because of its centrally controlled economic policies or its excessive military burdens, but because its closed societies were too long denied the fruits of the information revolution." This view has proved remarkably sticky. As late as 2002, Francis Fukuyama, himself a RAND Corporation alumnus, would write that "totalitarian rule depended on a regime's ability to maintain a monopoly over information, and once modern information technology made that impossible, the regime's power was undermined."

By 1995 true believers in the power of information to crush authoritarianism were treated to a book-length treatise. *Dismantling Utopia: How Information Ended the Soviet Union*, a book by Scott Shane—who from 1988 to 1991 served as the *Baltimore Sun's* Moscow correspondent—tried to make the best case for why information mattered, arguing that the "death of the Soviet illusion . . . [was] not by tanks and bombs but by facts and opinions, by the release of information bottled up for decades."

The crux of Shane's thesis was that as the information gates opened under glasnost, people discovered unpleasant facts about the KGB's atrocities while also being exposed to life in the West. He wasn't entirely incorrect: Increased access to previously suppressed information did expose the numerous lies advanced by the Soviet regime. (There were so many revisions to history textbooks in 1988 that a nationwide history examination had to be scrapped, as it wasn't clear if the old curriculum could actually count as "history" anymore.) It didn't take long until, to use one of Shane's memorable phrases, "ordinary information, mere facts, exploded like grenades, ripping the system and its legitimacy."

Hold On to Your Data Grenade, Comrade!

Facts exploding like grenades certainly make for a gripping journalistic narrative, but it's not the only reason why such accounts are so popular. Their wide acceptance also has to do with the fact that they always put

people, rather than some abstract force of history or economics, first. Any information-centric account of the end of the Cold War is bound to prioritize the role of its users—dissidents, ordinary protesters, NGOs—and downplay the role played by structural, historical factors—the unbearable foreign debt accumulated by many Central European countries, the slowing down of the Soviet economy, the inability of the Warsaw Pact to compete with NATO.

Those who reject the structural explanation and believe that 1989 was a popular revolution from below are poised to see the crowds that gathered in the streets of Leipzig, Berlin, and Prague as exerting enormous pressure on communist institutions and eventually suffocating them. "Structuralists," on the other hand, don't make much of the crowds. For them, by October 1989 the communist regimes were already dead, politically and economically; even if the crowds would not have been as numerous, the regimes would still be as dead. And if one assumes that the Eastern European governments were already dysfunctional, unable or reluctant to fight for their existence, the heroism of protesters matters much less than most information-centric accounts suggest. Posing on the body of a dead lion that was felled by indigestion makes for a far less impressive photo op.

This debate—whether it was the dissidents or some impersonal social force that brought down communism in Eastern Europe—has taken a new shape in the growing academic dispute about whether something like "civil society" (still a favorite buzzword of many foundations and development institutions) existed under communism and whether it played any significant role in precipitating the public protests. Debates over "civil society" have immense repercussions for the future of Internet freedom policy, in part because this fuzzy concept is often endowed with revolutionary potential and bloggers are presumed to be in its vanguard. But if it turns out that the dissidents—and civil society as a whole—did not play much of a role in toppling communism, then the popular expectations about the new generation of Internet revolutions may be overblown as well. Getting it right matters because the unchecked belief in the power of civil society, just like the

unchecked power in the ability of firewall-breaching tools, would ultimately lead to bad policy and prioritize courses of action that may not be particularly effective.

Stephen Kotkin, a noted expert of Soviet history at Princeton University, has argued that the myth of civil society as a driver of anticommunist change was mostly invented by Western academics, donors, and journalists. "In 1989 'civil society' could not have shattered Soviet-style socialism for the simple reason that civil society in Eastern Europe did not then actually exist." And Kotkin has got the evidence to back it up: In early 1989 the Czechoslovak intelligence apparatus estimated that the country's active dissidents were no more than five hundred people, with a core of about sixty (and even as the protests broke out in Prague, the dissidents were calling for elections rather than a complete overthrow of the communist regime). The late Tony Judt, another gifted historian of Eastern European history, observed that Václav Havel's Charter 77 attracted fewer than 2,000 signatures in a Czechoslovak population of fifteen million. Similarly, the East German dissident movement did not play a significant role in getting people onto the streets of Leipzig and Berlin, and such movements almost did not exist in Romania or Bulgaria. Something like civil society did exist in Poland, but it was also one of the few countries with virtually no significant protests in 1989. Kotkin is thus justified in concluding that "just like the 'bourgeoisie' were mostly an outcome of 1789, so 'civil society' was more a consequence than a primary cause of 1989."

But even if civil society didn't exist as such, people did come out to Prague's Wenceslas Square, choosing to spend cold November days chanting antigovernment slogans under the ubiquitous gaze of police forces. Whatever their role, the crowds certainly didn't hurt the cause of democratization. If one believes that the crowds matter, then a more effective tool of getting them into the streets would be a welcome addition; thus, the introduction of a powerful new technology—a photocopier to copy the leaflets at rates ten times faster than before—is a genuine improvement. So are any changes in the way by which people can reveal their incentives to each other. If you know that twenty of your friends will join a protest, you may be more likely to join as well.

Facebook is, thus, something of a godsend to protest movements. It would be silly to deny that new means of communications can alter the likelihood and the size of a protest.

Nevertheless, if the Eastern European regimes had not already been dead, they would have mounted a defense that would have prevented any "information cascades" (the preferred scholarly term for such snowball-like public participation) from forming in the first place. On this reading, the East German regime was simply unwilling to crack down on the first wave of protests in Leipzig, well aware that it was heading for a collective suicide. Furthermore, in 1989, unlike in 1956 or 1968, the Kremlin, ruled by a new generation of leaders who still had vivid memories of the brutality of their predecessors, didn't think that bloody crackdowns were a good idea, and East Germany's senior leaders were too weak and hesitant to do it alone. As Perry Anderson, one of the most insightful students of contemporary European history, once remarked, "nothing fundamental could change in Eastern Europe so long as the Red Army remained ready to fire. Everything was possible once fundamental change started in Russia itself." To argue that it was the photocopies that triggered change in Russia and then the rest of the region is to engage in such a grotesque simplification of history that one may as well abandon practicing history altogether. This is not to deny that they played a role, but only to deny the monocausal relationship that many want to establish.

When the Radio Waves Seemed Mightier Than the Tanks

If there is a genuine lesson to be drawn from Cold War history, it is that the increased effectiveness of information technology is still severely constrained by the internal and external politics of the regime at hand, and once those politics start changing, it may well be possible to take advantage of the new technologies. A strong government that has a will to live would do its utmost to deny Internet technology its power to mobilize. As long as the Internet is tied to physical infrastructure, this is not so hard to accomplish: In virtually all authoritarian states, governments

maintain control over communication networks and can turn them off at the first sign of protests. As the Chinese authorities began worrying about the growing unrest in Xinjiang in 2009, they simply turned off all Internet communications for ten months; it was a very thorough cleansing, but a few weeks would suffice in less threatening cases. Of course, they may incur significant economic losses because of such information blackouts, but when forced to choose between a blackout and a coup, many choose the former.

Even the strongest authoritarian governments are consistently challenged by protesters. It seems somewhat naïve to believe that strong authoritarian governments will balk at cracking down on protesters for fear of being accused of being too brutal, even if their every action is captured on camera; most likely, they will simply learn how to live with those accusations. The Soviet Union didn't hesitate to send tanks to Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968; the Chinese didn't pause before sending tanks to Tiananmen Square, despite a sophisticated network of fax machines that was sending the information to the West; the Burmese junta didn't balk at suppressing a march by the monks, despite the presence of foreign journalists documenting their actions. The most overlooked aspect of the 2009 protests in Tehran is that even though the government was well aware that many protesters were carrying mobile phones, it still dispatched snipers on building roofs and ordered them to shoot (one such sniper supposedly shot twenty-seven-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan; her death was captured on video, and she became one of the heroes of the Green Movement, with one Iranian factory even manufacturing statues of her). There is little evidence to suggest that, at least for the kind of leaders who are least likely to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, exposure results in less violence.

Most important, governments can also take advantage of decentralized information flows and misinform their population about how popular the protest movement really is. That decentralization and multiplication of digital information would somehow make it easier for the fence-sitters to infer what is really happening in the streets seems a rather unfounded assumption. In fact, history teaches us that media could as easily send false signals; many Hungarians still remember the utterly

irresponsible broadcasts by Radio Free Europe on the eve of the Soviet invasion in 1956, which suggested that American military aid would be forthcoming (it wasn't). Some of those broadcasts even offered tips on antitank warfare, urging the Hungarians to resist the Soviet occupation; they could be held at least partially responsible for the 3,000 deaths that followed the invasion. Such misinformation, whether deliberate or not, could flourish in the age of Twitter (the effort to spread fake videos purporting to show the burning of Ayatollah Khomeini's portrait in the aftermath of the Iranian protests is a case in point).

Nor is the decentralized nature of communications always good in itself, especially if the objective is to make as many people informed as fast as possible. In a 2009 interview with the *Globe and Mail*, the East German dissident Rainer Muller noted how beneficial it was that the nation's attention was not dispersed in the late 1980s: "You didn't have people looking at 200 different TV channels and 10,000 websites and e-mails from thousands of people. You could put something on a Western TV or radio station and you could be sure that half the country would know it." Few oppositional movements can boast such sizable audiences in the age of YouTube, especially when they are forced to compete with the much funnier videos of cats flushing the toilet.

While a definitive history of the Cold War remains to be written, the uniqueness of its end is not to be underestimated. Too many factors were stacked against the survival of the Soviet system: Gorbachev sent a number of cautionary signals to the communist leaders of Eastern Europe warning them against crackdowns and making it clear that the Kremlin wouldn't assist in suppressing popular uprisings; a number of Eastern European countries were running economies on the brink of bankruptcy and had a very dark future ahead of them, with or without the protests; East German police could have easily prevented the demonstrations in Leipzig, but its leaders did not exercise their authority; and a small technical change in Poland's electoral law could have prevented the Solidarity movement from forming a government that inspired other democratic movements in the region.

This is the great paradox of the Cold War's end: On the one hand, the structural conditions of countries of the Soviet bloc in late 1989

were so lethal that it seemed inevitable that communism would die. On the other hand, communist hard-liners had so much room to maneuver that absolutely nothing guaranteed that the end of the Cold War would be as bloodless as it turned out to be. Given how many things could have gone wrong in the process, it's still something of a miracle that the Soviet bloc—Romania notwithstanding—went under so peacefully. It takes a rather peculiar historical sense to look at this highly particularistic case and draw far-reaching conclusions about the role of technology in its demise and then assume that such conclusions would also hold in completely different contexts like China or Iran twenty years later. Western policymakers should rid themselves of the illusion that communism ended quickly—under the pressure of information or fax machines—or that it was guaranteed to end peacefully because the whole world was watching. The fall of communism was the result of a much longer process, and the popular protests were just its most visible, but not necessarily most important, component. Technology may have played a role, but it did so because of particular historical circumstances rather than because of technology's own qualities. Those circumstances were highly specific to Soviet communism and may no longer exist.

Western policymakers simply can't change modern Russia, China, or Iran using methods from the late 1980s. Simply opening up the information gates would not erode modern authoritarian regimes, in part because they have learned to function in an environment marked by the abundance of information. And it certainly doesn't hurt that, contrary to the expectations of many in the West, certain kinds of information could actually strengthen them.

chapter three

Orwell's Favorite Lolcat



The Tits Show" sounds like a promising name for a weekly Internet show. Hosted by Russia.ru, Russia's pioneering experiment in Internet television supported by Kremlin's ideologues, the show's format is rather simple: A horny and slightly overweight young man travels around Moscow nightclubs in search of perfect breasts. Moscow nightlife being what it is, the show is never short of things to film and women to grope and interview.

"The Tits Show" is just one of more than two dozen weekly and daily video shows produced by the Russia.ru team to satisfy the quirky tastes of Russian Internet users (and "produced" they truly are: much of the site's staff are defectors from the world of professional television). Some of those shows discuss politics—there are even a few odd interviews with Russia's president, Dmitry Medvedev—but most are quite frivolous in nature. A sample episode of the "books show": an exploration of the best books about alcohol available in Moscow's bookstores.

If one reads the Western press, it's easy to get the impression that the Internet in Russia is an effective and extremely popular vehicle for attacking—if not overthrowing—the government. Nevertheless, while

civic activism—raising money for sick children and campaigning to curb police corruption—is highly visible on the Russian Internet, it's still entertainment and social media that dominate (in this respect, Russia hardly differs from the United States or countries in Western Europe). The most popular Internet searches on Russian search engines are not for "what is democracy?" or "how to protect human rights" but for "what is love?" and "how to lose weight."

Russia.ru does not hide its connections to the Kremlin; senior members of the Kremlin's various youth movement even have their own talk shows. The need for such a site stems from the Kremlin's concern that the transition from the world of television, which it fully controls, to the anarchic world of the Internet might undermine the government's ability to set the agenda and shape how the public reacts to news. To that effect, the Kremlin supports, directly or indirectly, a host of sites about politics, which are usually quick to denounce the opposition and welcome every government initiative, but increasingly branches out into apolitical entertainment. From the government's perspective, it's far better to keep young Russians away from politics altogether, having them consume funny videos on Russia's own version of YouTube, RuTube (owned by Gazprom, the country's state-owned energy behemoth), or on Russia.ru, where they might be exposed to a rare ideological message as well. Many Russians are happy to comply, not least because of the high quality of such online distractions. The Russian authorities may be onto something here: The most effective system of Internet control is not the one that has the most sophisticated and draconian system of censorship, but the one that has no need for censorship whatsoever.

The Kremlin's growing online entertainment empire may explain why there is little formal censorship in Russia—the Kremlin doesn't ban access to any of its opponents' websites, with the minor exception of those created by terrorists and child molesters—and yet surprisingly little political activity. Russia.ru, with its highly skilled team and flexible budget, is just one of the many attempts to control the space; it does so by relying on entertainment rather than politics. Could it be that the vast online reservoirs of cheap entertainment are dampening the en-

thusiasm that the Russian youth might have for politics, thus preventing their radicalization? What if the liberating potential of the Internet also contains the seeds of depoliticization and thus dedemocratization? Could it be that just as the earlier generation of Western do-gooders mistakenly believed that Soviet office workers were secretly typing samizdat literature on their computers (rather than playing Tetris), so Westerners today harbor futile hopes that Russians are blogging about human rights and Stalin's abuses, while they are only flipping through ChatRoulette, Russia's quirky gift to the Internet?

How Cable Undermines Democracy

Here again the focus on the role of broadcasting in the Cold War keeps the West ignorant of the complex role that information plays in authoritarian societies. Two theories explain how exposure to Western media could have democratized the Soviets. One claims that Western media showed brainwashed citizens that their governments were not as innocent as they claimed to be and pushed people to think about political issues they may have previously avoided; it's what we can call "liberation by facts" theory. The second asserts that Western media spread images of prosperity and fueled consumerist angst; stories of fast cars, fancy kitchen appliances, and suburban happiness made citizens living under authoritarianism dream of change and become more active politically. This is what we can call "liberation by gadgets" theory.

While projecting the images of prosperity was easy, getting people to care about politics was more difficult—at least people who were not previously politicized. To that extent, Western broadcasting efforts included both entertainment and lifestyle programs (one of Radio Free Europe's hits was *Radio Doctor*, a program that informed listeners about recent developments in Western medicine and answered specific questions from laypeople, exposing the inefficiencies of the Soviet system in the process). Banned music was frequently broadcast as well (one survey of Belarusian youths in 1985 found that 75 percent of them listened to foreign broadcasts, mostly to catch up on music they couldn't get otherwise). In this way the West could capitalize on the

cultural rigidity of communism, lure listeners with the promise of better entertainment, and secretly feed them with political messages. (Not everyone was convinced such a strategy was effective. In 1953 Walter Lippmann, one of the fathers of modern propaganda, penned a poignant op-ed, arguing that “to set up an elaborate machinery of international communication and then have it say, ‘We are the Voice of America engaged in propaganda to make you like us better than you like our adversaries,’ is—as propaganda—an absurdity. As a way of stimulating an appetite for the American way of life, it is like serving castor oil as a cocktail before dinner.”) “Politicization” and involvement in oppositional politics were thus by-products of desire for entertainment that the West knew how to satisfy. This may not have led to the emergence of civil society, of course, but it has certainly made ideas associated with the democratic revolutions of 1989 more palatable in the end.

The media’s roles in the cultivation of political knowledge in both democratic and authoritarian societies are strikingly similar. Before the rise of cable television in the West, knowledge about politics—especially of the everyday variety—was something of an accident even in democratic societies. Markus Prior, a scholar of political communications at Princeton University, argues that most Americans were exposed to political news not because they wanted to watch it but because there was nothing else to watch. This resulted in citizens who were far better politically informed, much more likely to participate in politics, and far less likely to be partisan than today. The emergence of cable television, however, gave people the choice between consuming political news and anything else—and most viewers, predictably, went for that “anything else” category, which mostly consisted of entertainment. A small cluster has continued to care about politics—and, thanks to the rise of the niche media, they have more opportunities that they could ever wish for—but the rest of the population has disengaged.

Prior’s insights about the negative effects of media choice in the context of Western democracies can also shed light on why the Internet may not boost political knowledge and politicize the fence-sitters, the ones who remain undecided about whether to voice their grievances

against their governments, to the degree that some of us hope. The drive for entertainment simply outweighs the drive for political knowledge—and YouTube could easily satisfy even the most demanding entertainment junkies. Watching the equivalent of “The Tits Show” in the 1970s required getting exposure to at least a five-second political commercial (even if it was the jingle of Radio Free Europe), while today one can avoid such political messages altogether.

The Denver Clan Conquers East Berlin

If policymakers stopped focusing on “virtual walls” and “information curtains,” as if those are all that the Cold War could teach them, they might discover a more useful lesson on the entertainment front. The German Democratic Republic presents a fascinating case of a communist country that for virtually all of its existence could receive Western broadcasting. It would seem natural to expect that of all the other communist states GDR would have the most politically informed citizens, the most vibrant political opposition, and civil society groups as well as a burgeoning samizdat enterprise. These expectations would be in line with how the impact of information was viewed during the Cold War. It was all too easy to fall under the impression that all media consumption was political, because researchers had two limited sources for their assertions: recent émigrés and those who wrote admiring letters to the likes of Radio Free Europe. Such sources bolstered the view that consuming official narratives of events in state-run media led to apathy and disillusionment, pushing people to seek solace in foreign radio programs. Yet neither of the two groups were unbiased, and the conclusions of such studies have been repeatedly challenged. Concluding that people who wrote letters to Radio Free Europe were representative of the population at large was like walking into a bar a few blocks from Congress, interviewing a few congressional staffers deeply mesmerized by a C-SPAN broadcast on the bar’s wall, and lauding the fact that most Americans are superbly informed about the nuts and bolts of national politics. (That said, not all researchers doing such quasi-detective work were dilettantes; to access the actual views of the people

they interviewed and whose letters they read, they paid particular attention to Freudian slips and typos.)

Eventually there emerged a far better, more empirical way to test common Western assumptions about the role of media in authoritarian regimes. It was a stroke of luck: East Germany's geography made it difficult to block Western signals on most of its territory, and only one-sixth of the population, concentrated mostly in counties that were far from the western border, could not receive West German television (this area was widely known—and ridiculed—as *Tal Der Ahnungslosen*, "The Valley of the Clueless"). In 1961—the year the Berlin Wall went up—the country's leading youth organization, Freie Deutsche Jugend, began dispatching their youthful troops to many a rooftop to find antennae aimed at the West and either dismantle them or reorient them toward East German transmission towers. Popular anger, however, quickly drove the youngsters away, and such raids stopped. By 1973 GDR's leader, Erich Honecker, acknowledging that West German television was already widely popular, gave up and allowed all GDR's citizens—except soldiers, police, and teachers—to watch whatever they wanted, on the condition the citizens would closely scrutinize everything they saw and heard in the Western media. At the same time, Honecker urged GDR's own television to "overcome a certain type of tedium" and "to take the desire for good entertainment into account." Thus, for nearly three decades, most of GDR's citizens were in a rather peculiar situation: They could, in theory, compare how the two German regimes—one democratic and one communist—chose to portray the same events. If the conclusions of all those studies that analyzed letters sent to Radio Free Europe were right, one could expect that East Germans would be glued to news programs from the democratic West, learning of the abuses of their own regime and searching for secret antigovernment cells to join.

It's hard to say whether East Germans did practice as much media criticism as Western scholars would have subsequently wanted them to, but it seems that Western television only made them more complacent—a fact that GDR's ruling elites eventually recognized. When they insisted on removing a satellite dish that was illegally installed by the residents

of the small German town of Weissenberg, the local communist officials and the mayor were quick to point out that members of their community were "'much more content' since the introduction of West German television," that their attitudes toward the East German regime had become "more positive," and that all applications for exit visas (that is, to immigrate to the West) had been withdrawn. From the early 1980s onwards, satellites were openly tolerated by the authorities.

East Germans were not all that interested in tracking the latest news from NATO. Instead, they preferred soft news and entertainment, particularly American TV series. Such shows as *Dallas*, *Miami Vice*, *Bonanza*, *Sesame Street*, and *The Streets of San Francisco* were particularly popular; even the leading Communist Party journal *Einheit* acknowledged that *Dynasty*—known in Germany as *The Denver Clan* and the most popular of the lot—was widely watched. Paul Gleye, an American Fulbright scholar who lived and taught in GDR between 1988 and 1989, remembers that whenever he brought out his map of the United States to tell East Germans about his country, "the first question often was 'Well, show me where Dallas and Denver are,'" while his students "seemed to be more interested in hearing about Montana State University when I told them it was about 850 kilometers northwest of Denver than when I described its setting in a picturesque Alpine valley in the Rocky Mountains."

Long after the Berlin Wall fell, Michael Meyen and Ute Nawratil, two German academics, conducted extensive interviews with hundreds of East Germans. They found that many of them did not even believe what they heard on the Western news. They thought that the portrayal of life in East Germany was predictably uninformed and highly ideological, while the extensive propaganda of their own government made them expect that Western news, too, was heavily shaped by the government. (Ironically, in their distrust and suspicion of the Western propaganda apparatus, they were more Chomskian than Noam Chomsky himself). When, in a separate study, East Germans were asked what changes they would like to see in their country's television programming, they voted for more entertainment and less politics. Eventually GDR's propaganda officials learned that the best way to have at least a

modicum of people watch their ideological programming on GDR's own television was to schedule it when West German television was running news and current affairs programs—which East Germans found to be the least interesting.

The Opium of the Masses: Made in GDR

That the never-ending supply of Western entertainment made large parts of GDR's population useless as far as activism was concerned was not lost on German dissidents. As Christopher Hein, a prominent East German writer and dissident, stated in a 1990 interview:

[In the GDR we had a difficult task because] the whole people could leave the country and move to the West as a man every day at 8 PM—via television. That lifted the pressure. Here is the difference between Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union. There the pressure continued to bear down and generated counter-pressure. . . . That's why I always envied the Russians and the Poles. . . . In general, the helpful proximity of the Federal Republic was not helpful to our own development. . . . Here we had no samizdat, as long as we had access to the publishing houses of West Germany.

Subsequent research based on archival data proved Hein right. East German authorities, preoccupied with their own survival, spent a lot of resources on understanding the attitudes of their young citizens. To that effect, they commissioned a number of regular studies, most of which were conducted by the ominous-sounding Central Institute for Youth Research founded in 1966. Between 1966 and 1990 it conducted several hundred surveys that studied the attitudes of high school and college students, young workers, and others; the staff of the institute could not study other demographic groups, nor could they publish their results—those were classified. The reports were declassified after German unification and have opened up a bounty of research for academics studying life in East Germany. The surveys polled respondents about regime support (e.g., asking them whether they agreed with state-

ments like “I am convinced of the Leninist/Marxist worldview” and “I feel closely attached to East Germany”).

Holger Lutz Kern and Jens Hainmueller, two German academics teaching in the United States, studied this data to understand how the relationship between life satisfaction and regime support varied according to the availability of Western broadcasting. They published their findings in a provocatively titled paper, “Opium for the Masses: How Foreign Media Can Stabilize Authoritarian Regimes.” They found that those East German youth who could receive Western television were, overall, more satisfied and content with the regime; the ones who could not receive Western television—those living in the Valley of the Clueless—were much more politicized, more critical of the regime, and, most interestingly, more likely to apply for exit visas. Thus, they wrote, “in an ironic twist for Marxism, capitalist television seems to have performed the same narcotizing function in communist East Germany that Karl Marx had attributed to religious beliefs in capitalism societies when he condemned religion as ‘opium of the people.’”

They described this process as “escapism”: “West German Television allowed East Germans to vicariously escape life under communism at least for a couple of hours each night, making their lives more bearable and the East German regime more tolerable. . . . West German television exposure resulted in a net increase in regime support.” If anything, access to excellent entertainment from the West—it took GDR authorities many years to start producing high-quality entertainment programs that could rival those from abroad—depoliticized vast swathes of the East German population, even as it nominally allowed them to learn more about the injustices of their own regime from Western news programs. Western television made life in East Germany more bearable, and by doing so it may have undermined the struggle of the dissident movement. Most interestingly, it was in the Valley of the Clueless that protests began brewing; its residents were clearly more dissatisfied with life in the country than those who found a refuge in the exciting world of *The Denver Clan*.

If we judge by the youth survey data, we might conclude that young people were particularly susceptible to escapism; moreover, we don't have

much data for East German adults. The “liberation by gadgets” theory may thus have some validity. Perhaps, the adults, disappointed by the never-arriving “socialism with a human face,” were much more susceptible to despair and thus easier to politicize with teasing pictures of Western capitalism. Paul Betts, a British academic who has studied consumer culture in GDR, points out that “those things that the state had supposedly overcome in the name of the great socialist experiment—subjective fancy, individual luxury, commodity fetishism, and irrational consumer desire—eventually returned as its arch nemeses. The irony is that the people apparently took these dreams of a better and more prosperous world more seriously than the state ever expected, so much so that the government was ultimately sued for false advertising.” Or, as a popular joke of that period had it: “Marxism would have worked if it wasn’t for cars.” (It seems that the Chinese have learned the East German lesson, purchasing the entire Volvo operation from Ford in 2010.)

The East German experience shows that the media could play a much more complex and ambiguous role under authoritarianism than many in the West initially assumed. Much of the early scholarship on the subject greatly underestimated the need for entertainment and overestimated the need for information, especially of the political variety. Whatever external pressures, most people eventually find a way to accustom themselves to the most brutal political realities, whether by means of television, art, or sex.

Furthermore, the fact that the media did such a superb job at covering the fall of the Berlin Wall may have influenced many observers to believe that it played a similarly benevolent role throughout the entire history of the Cold War. But this was just a utopian dream: Whatever noble roles media take on during extraordinary crisis situations should not be generalized, for their everyday functions are strikingly different and are much more likely to be geared toward entertainment (if only because it sells better). A case in point: While many praised Twitter’s role in publicizing and promoting political demonstrations in Iran, the death of Michael Jackson on June 25, 2009, quickly overtook the protests as the site’s most popular topic.

Watching *Avatar* in Havana

But if the Western media made the consumerist benefits of capitalism easier to grasp than any piece of samizdat, it only gave its hopeful Eastern European viewers a rather shallow view on how democracy works and what kind of commitments and institutions it requires. As Erazim Kohák, a Czech-American philosopher whose family emigrated to the United States in 1948, memorably wrote in 1992: “The unfortunate truth is that as the former subjects of the Soviet empire dream it, the American dream has very little to do with liberty and justice for all and a great deal to do with soap operas and the Sears catalogue. . . . It is a dream made up mostly of irresponsibility, unreality, and instantly gratified greed.” Kohák knew that it was affluence—“the glittering plenty we glimpsed across the border in Germany and Austria . . . freedom from care, freedom from responsibility”—rather than some abstract notion of Jeffersonian democracy that the Eastern European masses really wanted. As Kohák was quick to point out, affluence came fast in the early 1990s, without anyone giving much thought to what else democracy should mean: “When the popular Czech cartoonist Renčín draws his vision of what freedom will bring, he draws a man blissing out on a sofa, surrounded by toys and trophies—an outdoor motor, a television set with a VCR, a personal computer, a portable bar, an LP grill. There is not a trace of irony in it: this is what freedom means.”

But the Russia or China of today is not the East Germany or Czechoslovakia of the late 1980s. Except for North Korea, Turkmenistan, and perhaps Burma, modern authoritarian states have embraced consumerism, and it seems to have strengthened rather than undermined their regimes. Popular culture, especially when left unchecked by appeals to some higher truth or ideal, has eroded the political commitment of even the most dissatisfied citizens. Although the jubilant Czechs installed Václav Havel, a playwright and formidable intellectual, as their leader, they couldn’t resist the consumerist tornado sweeping through their lands (ironically, “Power of the Powerless” essay, Havel’s most famous attack on the totalitarian system, was a fulmination against the petty-mindedness of a communist store manager). Havel should

have listened to Philip Roth, who in 1990 gave him and his fellow Czech intellectuals a most precious piece of advice on the pages of the *New York Review of Books*. Roth predicted that soon the cult of the dissident intellectuals would be replaced by the cult of another, much more powerful adversary:

I can guarantee you that no defiant crowds will ever rally in Wenceslas Square to overthrow its tyranny nor will any playwright-intellectual be elevated by the outraged masses to redeem the national soul from the fatuity into which this adversary reduces virtually all of human discourse. I am speaking about that trivializer of everything, commercial television—not a handful of channels of boring clichéd television that nobody wants to watch because it is controlled by an oafish state censor, but a dozen or two channels of boring, clichéd television that most everybody watches all the time because it is *entertaining*.

Roth could not have predicted the rise of YouTube, which has proven even more entertaining than cable. (He seems to avoid most of the pleasures of the Web; in a 2009 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, he claimed he only uses it to buy books and groceries.)

As a writer for the *Times of London* summarized the situation, some of the former communist countries “may have escaped the grip of dictators to fall instead under the spell of Louis Vuitton.”

In the absence of high ideals and stable truths, it has become nearly impossible to awaken people’s political consciousness, even to fight authoritarianism. How can you, when everyone is busy buying plasma TVs (Chinese today buy TVs with the biggest screens in the world, beating Americans by four inches), shopping for stuff online (a company linked to the Iranian government launched an online supermarket the same week that the authorities decided to ban Gmail), and navigating a city with the highest number of BMWs per square meter (that would be Moscow)? Even the official media in Cuba, that stalwart of revolutionary values, now broadcast TV series like *The Sopranos*, *Friends*, and *Grey’s Anatomy*. In early 2010 they reportedly broadcast a pirated version of the movie *Avatar* shortly after it opened in U.S. the-

aters. (The communist critics, however, remained unconvinced; “predictable . . . very simplistic . . . reiterative in its argument” was the verdict of movie buffs from *Granma*, the official daily of the Communist Party of Cuba—perhaps they didn’t get the memo about the 3D glasses.) It’s hardly surprising that fewer than 2 percent of Cubans tune in to the radio broadcasts funded by the U.S. government through Radio Martí, Cuba’s equivalent of Radio Free Europe. Why should ordinary Cubans take any risks to listen to highly ideological and somewhat boring news about politics if they can follow the travails of Tony Soprano?

The same young people America wants to liberate with information are probably better informed about U.S. popular culture than many Americans. Teams of Chinese netizens regularly collaborate to produce Chinese-language subtitles for popular American shows like *Lost* (often they find those shows on various peer-to-peer file-sharing sites as soon as ten minutes after new episodes air in the United States). Could it also be some kind of modern-day samizdat? Maybe, but there is little indication that it poses any threat to the Chinese government. If anyone is “lost,” it’s the citizens, not the authorities. Even authoritarian governments have discovered that the best way to marginalize dissident books and ideas is not to ban them—this seems only to boost interest in the forbidden fruit—but to let the invisible hand flood the market with trashy popular detective stories, self-help manuals, and books on how to get your kids into Harvard (texts like *You Too Can Go to Harvard: Secrets of Getting into Famous U.S. Universities* and *Harvard Girl* are best sellers in China).

Feeling that resistance would be counterproductive, even the Burmese government has grudgingly allowed hip-hop artists to perform at state functions. The regime has also created a soccer league after years without any organized matches and increased the number of FM radio stations, allowing them to play Western-style music. There even appeared something of a local MTV channel. As a Western-educated Burmese businessman told the *New York Times* in early 2010, “The government is trying to distract people from politics. There’s not enough bread, but there’s a lot of circus.” Once Burma is fully wired—and the junta is supportive of technology, having set up its own Silicon Valley in 2002 that

goes by the very un-Silicon Valley name of Myanmar Information and Communication Technology Park—the government won't have to try hard anymore; their citizens will get distracted on their own.

Today's battle is not between David and Goliath; it's between David and David Letterman. While we thought the Internet might give us a generation of "digital renegades," it may have given us a generation of "digital captives," who know how to find comfort online, whatever the political realities of the physical world. For these captives, online entertainment seems to be a much stronger attractor than reports documenting human rights abuses by their own governments (in this, they are much like their peers in the democratic West). One 2007 survey of Chinese youth found that 80 percent of respondents believe that "digital technology is an essential part of how I live," compared with 68 percent of American respondents. What's even more interesting, 32 percent of Chinese said that the Internet broadens their sex life, compared with just 11 percent of Americans. A Fudan University poll in June 2010 of nine hundred female graduates at seventeen Shanghai universities revealed that 70 percent don't think that one-night stands are immoral, while in 2007 a Shanghai-based doctor who runs a helpline for pregnant teenagers in the city reported that 46 percent of more than 20,000 girls who called the helpline since 2005 said they had sex with boys they met on the Web. The implications of China's "hormone revolution" are not lost on the authorities, who are searching for ways to profit from it politically. The Chinese government, having cracked down on online pornography in early 2009, quickly lifted many of their bans, perhaps after realizing that censorship was a sure way to politicize millions of Chinese Internet users. Michael Anti, a Beijing-based expert on the Chinese Internet, believes this was a strategic move: "[The government must have reasoned that] if Internet users have some porn to look at, then they won't pay so much attention to political matters."

It seems highly naïve to assume that political ideals—let alone dissent—will somehow emerge from this great hodgepodge of consumerism, entertainment, and sex. As tempting as it is to think of Internet-based swinger clubs that have popped up in China in the last

few years as some kind of alternative civil society, it's quite possible that, since the main ideological tenets of Chairman Mao's thought have lost much of their intellectual allure, the Chinese Communist Party would find the space to accommodate such practices. Under the pressure of globalization, authoritarianism has become extremely accommodating.

Other governments, too, are beginning to understand that online entertainment—especially spiced up with pornography—can serve as a great distraction from politics. According to reports from the official Vietnam state news agency, officials in Hanoi were flirting with the idea of setting up "an orthodox sex Website"—replete with videos—that could help couples learn more about "healthy sexual intercourse." This won't be a surprise to most Vietnamese: Much of existing Internet censorship in the country targets political resources, while leaving many pornographic sites unblocked. As Bill Hayton, a former BBC reporter in the country observes, "the Vietnamese firewall allows youngsters to consume plenty of porn but not Amnesty International reports." As online porn becomes ubiquitous, such restrictions may no longer be needed.

Unless the West stops glorifying those living in authoritarian governments, it risks falling under the false impression that if it builds enough tools to break through the barriers erected by authoritarian governments, citizens will inevitably turn into cheap clones of Andrei Sakharov and Václav Havel and rebel against repressive rule. This scenario seems highly dubious. Most likely, those very citizens would first get online to download porn, and it's not at all clear if they would return for political content. One experiment in 2007 involved Good Samaritans in the West volunteering to lend their computer bandwidth, via a tool called Psiphon, to strangers in countries that control the Internet, in the hope that, once they got their first taste of unfettered online freedom, they would use that chance to educate themselves about the horrors of their regimes. The reality was more disappointing. As *Forbes* magazine described it, once liberated, the users searched for "nude pictures of Gwen Stefani and photos of a panty-less Britney Spears." Freedom to browse whatever one wants is, of course, worth defending in its own right, but it's important to remember that, at least from a policy

perspective, such freedoms would not necessarily bring about the revolutionary democratic outcomes that many in the West expect.

Online Discontents and Their Content Intellectuals

Phillip Roth's 1990 warning to the Czechs was also a perceptive observation that their most treasured public intellectuals—those who helped to bring democracy to the country—would soon no longer command the power or respect they had under communism. It was inevitable that dissident intellectuals would lose much of their appeal as the Internet opened the gates of entertainment while globalization opened the gates of consumerism. Another Sakharov seems inconceivable in today's Russia, and in the unlikely event that he does appear, he would probably enjoy far less influence on Russian national discourse than Artemy Lebedev, Russia's most popular blogger, who uses his blog to run weekly photo competitions to find a woman with the most beautiful breasts (the subject of breasts, one must note, is far more popular in the Russian blogosphere than that of democracy).

But intellectuals are not blameless here either. As democracy replaced communism, many of them were bitterly disappointed by the populist, xenophobic, and vulgar politics favored by the masses. Despite the widespread myth that Soviet dissidents were all believers in U.S.-style democracy, many of them—including, at some point, even Sakharov—felt extremely ambivalent about letting people rule themselves; what many of them really wanted was better-run communism. But the triumph of liberal democracy and the consumerism that it unleashed sent many of these intellectuals into the second, perhaps somewhat less repressive, phase of their internal exile, this time combined with despicable obscurity.

It would take a new generation of intellectuals—and unusually creative intellectuals at that—to awaken the captive minds of their fellow citizens from their current entertainment slumber. As it turns out, there is not much demand for intellectuals when so many social and cultural needs can be satisfied the same way they are satisfied in the West: with an iPad. (It helps that China knows how to manufacture them at half

the price!) The Belarusian writer Svetlana Aleksievich knows that the game is over, at least as far as serious ideas are concerned: "The point is not that we have no Havel, we do, but that they are not called for by society." And the Belarusian government, not surprisingly, doesn't seem to object to this state of affairs. On a recent trip to Belarus I discovered that some Internet Service Providers run their own servers full of illegal movies and music, available to their customers for free, while the government, which could easily put an end to such practices, prefers to look the other way and may even be encouraging them.

Consumerism is not the only reason behind the growing disengagement between the intellectuals and the masses living in authoritarian states. The Internet opened up a trove of resources for the former, allowing them to connect to their Western colleagues and follow global intellectual debates as they happen, not as their summaries are smuggled in on yellowish photocopies. But efficiency and comfort—which the Internet provides—are not necessarily the best conditions for fomenting dissent among the educated classes. The real reason why so many scientists and academics turned to dissent during Soviet times was because they were not allowed to practice the kind of science they wanted to on their own terms. Doing any kind of research in the social sciences was quite difficult even without having to follow the ideological line of the local communist cell; collaborating with foreigners was equally challenging. Lack of proper working conditions forced many academics and intellectuals either to immigrate or to stay home and become dissidents.

The Internet has solved or alleviated many of these problems, and it has proved excellent for research, but not so excellent for bringing smart and highly educated people into the dissident movement. Collaboration is now cheap and instantaneous, academics have access to more papers than they could have dreamed of, travel bans have been lifted, and research budgets have been significantly increased. Not surprisingly, by 2020 Chinese scientists are expected to produce more academic papers than American ones. Most significantly, the Internet has allowed better integration of academics and intellectuals from authoritarian states into a global intellectual sphere—they, too, can now follow debates in the *New York Review of Books*—but this has happened

at the expense of severing their ties to local communities. Russian liberal intellectuals draw far larger crowds in New York, London, or Berlin than they do in Moscow, Novosibirsk, or Vladivostok, where many of them remain unknown. Not surprisingly, most of them are better informed about what's going on in Greenwich Village than in their own town hall. But their connection to politics in their native countries has also been severed; paradoxically, as they have gotten more venues to express their anger and dissent, they have chosen to retract into the nonpolitical.

It's rather depressing that none of the major Russian writers who have established a rather active presence online bothered to discuss or even mention the results of the 2008 Russian presidential elections on their blogs. Ellen Rutten, at the University of Cambridge, was the first to notice and describe the virtually nonexistent reaction to such a highly political event. She wrote that "none of the . . . [blogging] authors . . . chose to switch on the computer and react in writing to the news that must have permeated their intellectual environment." Instead, the giants of modern Russian literature decided to devote their first blog posts after the election to: (a) discussing a recent Internet conference, (b) posting a theater review, (c) describing a gigantic pie with "little cherries and peaches" spotted at a recent book fair, (d) reviewing Walt Whitman, and (e) posting a story about a man with two brains. (One could only hope that at least that last entry was an allegory meant to ridicule the Putin-Medvedev alliance.) This is definitely not what the famous Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko meant when he proclaimed that "A poet in Russia is more than a poet."

This is hardly a promising environment for fighting the authoritarian chimera. All potential revolutionaries seem to be in a pleasant intellectual exile somewhere in California. The masses have been transported to Hollywood by means of pirated films they download from BitTorrent, while the elites have been shuttling between Palo Alto and Long Beach by way of TED talks. Whom exactly do we expect to lead this digital revolution? The lolcats?

If anything, the Internet makes it harder, not easier, to get people to care, if only because the alternatives to political action are so much

more pleasant and risk-free. This doesn't mean that we in the West should stop promoting unfettered (read: uncensored) access to the Internet; rather, we need to find ways to supplant our promotion of a freer Internet with strategies that can engage people in political and social life. Here we should talk to both heavy consumers of cat videos and those who follow anthropology blogs. Otherwise, we may end up with an army of people who are free to connect, but all they want to connect to is potential lovers, pornography, and celebrity gossip.

The environment of information abundance is not by itself conducive to democratization, as it may disrupt a number of subtle but important relationships that help to nurture critical thinking. It's only now, as even democratic societies are navigating through this new environment of infinite content, that we realize that democracy is a much trickier, fragile, and demanding beast than we had previously assumed and that some of the conditions that enabled it may have been highly specific to an epoch when information was scarce.

The Orwell-Huxley Sandwich Has Expired

As the East German experience revealed, many Western observers like endowing those living under authoritarian conditions with magical and heroic qualities they do not have. Perhaps imagining these poor folks in a perpetual struggle against the all-seeing KGB rather than, say, relaxing in front of YouTube or playing Tetris is the only way for Western observers not to despair at their own inability to do much about the situation. Nevertheless, that this is how they choose to interpret the nature of political control under authoritarianism is not an accident. Much of Western thinking on this issue has been heavily influenced—perhaps even constrained—by two twentieth-century thinkers who spent decades thinking about the diffusion of power and control under democracy, communism, and fascism. George Orwell (1903–1950) and Aldous Huxley (1894–1963), both men of letters who managed to leave indelible marks on the world of modern political thought, have each offered us powerful and yet strikingly different visions for how modern governments would exercise control over their populations

(those visions haunt millions of high school students who are to this day tasked with writing essays comparing the two). The presence of these two figures in modern public life is hard to miss: A day hardly goes by when someone in the media doesn't invoke either man to make a point about the future of democracy or the history of totalitarianism, and it's quite common to invoke both, as if one could fit any possible kind of political control in the spectrum between those two polar ends. Thus a shrewd Western politician would profess admiration of both (cue Hillary Clinton, who, when asked about books that influenced her the most, mentioned both Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World* in one breath).

Orwell's *1984* (1949), his most famous work and certainly one of the best novels of the twentieth century, emphasizes pervasive surveillance and mind-numbing propaganda composed in the meaningless vocabulary of "Newspeak." In Orwell's world, citizens are not entitled to any privacy; hence they treasure junk and scraps of paper, as those lie outside of the sphere controlled by the government and remind them of a much different past. Even their television sets are used to monitor their behavior. Winston Smith, the protagonist, is warned that neurologists are working to extinguish the orgasm, as full devotion to the Party requires the complete suppression of the libido.

Huxley's vision was articulated in *Brave New World* (1932) and a short later essay called *Brave New World Revisited* (1958). In Huxley's world, science and technology are put to good use to maximize pleasure, minimize the time one spends alone, and provide for a 24/7 cycle of consumption (one of the regime's slogans is "ending is better than mending!"). Not surprisingly, the citizens lose any ability to think critically and become complacent with whatever is imposed on them from above. Sexual promiscuity is encouraged from early childhood, even though sex is considered a social activity rather than the act of reproduction. The idea of a family is considered "pornographic," while social relations are organized around the maxim "everyone belongs to everyone else."

The two men knew each other and corresponded. Orwell, the younger of the two, even briefly studied French under Huxley's tutelage

at Oxford. In 1940 Orwell wrote a provocative review of Huxley's book, and Huxley revisited both his own work and *1984* in his *Brave New World Revisited*. Orwell thought that while Huxley provided "a good caricature of the hedonistic Utopia," he misunderstood the nature of power in a modern totalitarian state. "[*Brave New World* was] . . . the kind of thing that seemed possible and even imminent before Hitler appeared, but it had no relation to the actual future. What we are moving towards at this moment is something more like the Spanish Inquisition, and probably far worse, thanks to the radio and the secret police," wrote Orwell in a 1940 essay.

Huxley, however, wasn't convinced. In a 1949 letter to Orwell, he expressed his doubts about the social controls described in *1984*: "The philosophy of the ruling minority in *1984* is sadism which has been carried to its logical conclusion by going beyond sex and denying it. Whether in actual fact the policy of the boot-on-the-face can go on indefinitely seems doubtful." He continued: "My own belief is that the ruling oligarchy will find less arduous and wasteful ways of governing and of satisfying its lust for power, and that these ways will resemble those which I described in *Brave New World*."

Unlike Orwell, Huxley wasn't convinced that men were rational creatures who were always acting in their best interest. As he put it in *Brave New World Revisited*, what was often missing from the social analysis of Orwell and other civil libertarians was any awareness of "man's almost infinite appetite for distractions." Huxley was being unfair to Orwell, however. Orwell did not entirely discount the power of distraction: The Proles, the lowest class in *1984*'s three-class social hierarchy, are kept at bay with the help of cheap beer, pornography, and even a national lottery. Still, it was readers' fear of the omnipotent and all-seeing figure of Big Brother that helped to make Orwell's arguments famous.

Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, it has been something of a cliché to claim that Orwell failed to anticipate the rise of the consumer society and how closely technology would come to fulfill its desires. Huxley, too, was chided for underestimating the power of human agency to create spaces of dissent even within consumerist and hedonistic lifestyles, but it is widely assumed that he was the most prescient

of the two (particularly on the subject of genetics). "Brave New World is a far shrewder guess at the likely shape of a future tyranny than Orwell's vision of Stalinist terror in Nineteen Eighty-Four. . . . Nineteen Eighty-Four has never really arrived, but Brave New World is around us everywhere," wrote the British dystopian novelist J. G. Ballard in reviewing a Huxley biography for the *Guardian* in 2002. "Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us. This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right," is how Neil Postman chose to describe the theme of his best-selling *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. "[In contrast to *Brave New World*], the political predictions of . . . *1984* were entirely wrong," writes Francis Fukuyama in *Our Posthuman Future*. Maybe, but what many critics often fail to grasp is that both texts were written as sharp social critiques of contemporary problems rather than prophecies of the future.

Orwell's work was an attack on Stalinism and the stifling practices of the British censors, while Huxley's was an attack on the then-popular philosophy of utilitarianism. In other words, those books probably tell us more about the intellectual debates that were prevalent in Britain at the time than about the authors' visions of the future. In any case, both works have earned prominent places in the pantheon of twentieth-century literature, albeit in different sections. It's in criticizing contemporary democratic societies—with their cult of entertainment, sex, and advertising—that *Brave New World* succeeded most brilliantly. Orwell's *1984*, on the other hand, is to this day seen as a guide to understanding modern authoritarianism, with its pervasive surveillance, thought control through propaganda, and brutal censorship. Both Huxley's and Orwell's books have been pigeonholed to serve a particular political purpose: one to attack the foundations of modern capitalism, the other the basis of modern authoritarianism. Huxley, offspring of a prominent British family, was concerned with the increased commercialization of life in the West (he found his eventual solace in hallucinogenic drugs, penning *The Doors of Perception*, a book that later inspired Jim Morrison to name his rock band The Doors). Orwell, a committed socialist, emerged as a favorite thinker of the Ronald Reagan right; he was "the patron saint of the Cold War," as the writer Michael Scammell dubbed him. (The

Committee for the Free World, the leading neoconservative outfit of the 1980s, even called its publishing unit "the Orwell Press.")

But two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, the dichotomy between Orwell and Huxley's visions for the nature of political control seems outdated, if not false. It, too, is a product of the Cold War era and the propensity to engage in one-sided characterization of that ideological conflict by its participants. In reality, there was plenty of Orwellian surveillance in McCarthy-era America while there was plenty of hedonistic entertainment in Khrushchev-era USSR. The very existence of such a mental coordinate system with Orwell and Huxley at its opposite ends dictates its own extremely misleading dynamic: One can't be at both of its ends at once. To assume that all political regimes can be mapped somewhere on an Orwell-Huxley spectrum is an open invitation to simplification; to assume that a government would be choosing between reading their citizens' mail or feeding them with cheap entertainment is to lose sight of the possibility that a smart regime may be doing both.

Mash 'Em Up!

To borrow a few buzzwords from today's Internet culture, it's time to mash up and remix the two visions. To understand modern authoritarianism (and, some would argue, modern capitalism as well), we need insights from both thinkers. The rigidity of thought suggested by the Orwell-Huxley coordinate system leads many an otherwise shrewd observer to overlook the Huxleyan elements in dictatorships and, as disturbingly, the Orwellian elements in democracies. This is why it has become so easy to miss the fact that, as the writer Naomi Klein puts it, "China is becoming more like [the West] in very visible ways (Starbucks, Hooters, cellphones that are cooler than ours), and [the West is] becoming more like China in less visible ones (torture, warrantless wiretapping, indefinite detention, though not nearly on the Chinese scale)."

It seems fairly noncontroversial that most modern dictators would prefer a Huxleyan world to an Orwellian one, if only because controlling people through entertainment is cheaper and doesn't involve as

much brutality. When the extremely restrictive Burmese government permits—and sometimes even funds—hip-hop performances around the country, it's not 1984 that inspires them.

With a few clearly sadistic exceptions, dictators are not in it for the blood; all they want is money and power. If they can have it simply by distracting—rather than spying on, censoring, and arresting—their people, all the better. In the long term, this strategy is far more effective than 24/7 policing, because policing, as effective as it might be in the short term, tends to politicize people and drive them toward dissent in the longer run. That Big Brother no longer has to be watching its citizens because they themselves are watching *Big Brother* on TV hardly bodes well for the democratic revolution.

Thus, as far as distraction is concerned, the Internet has boosted the power of the Huxley-inspired dictatorships. YouTube and Facebook, with their bottomless reservoirs of cheap entertainment, allow individuals to customize the experience to suit their tastes. When Philip Roth was warning the Czechs of the perils of commercial television, he was also suggesting that it could make a revolution like the one in 1989 impossible. Ironically, the Czechs had been lucky to have such hapless apparatchiks running the entertainment industry. People got bored easily and turned to politics instead. Where new media and the Internet truly excel is in suppressing boredom. Previously, boredom was one of the few truly effective ways to politicize the population denied release valves for channeling their discontent, but this is no longer the case. In a sense, the Internet has made the entertainment experiences of those living under authoritarianism and those living in a democracy much alike. Today's Czechs watch the same Hollywood movies as today's Belarusians—many probably even download them from the same illegally run servers somewhere in Serbia or Ukraine. The only difference is that the Czechs already had a democratic revolution, the results of which, luckily for them, were made irreversible when the Czech Republic joined the European Union. Meanwhile, the Belarusians were not as lucky; the prospects of their democratic revolution in the age of YouTube look very grim.

In other words, the Internet has brought the kind of creative entertainment that Roth was warning against into most closed societies without breaking down their authoritarian governance. Besides, YouTube entertainment is free of charge—unless dictators make secret donations to Hollywood—so the money saved on producing boring state entertainment can now be diverted to other budget lines.

That Internet freedom has taken on such a democracy-squashing quality does not mean that dictators were planning this all along; in most cases, it's simply the result of earlier authoritarian incompetence. Would dictators ever have allowed YouTube in their countries if anyone had asked them? Probably not. They don't always grasp the strategic value of distraction, overestimating the risks of people-led protest. By their sheer haplessness or misjudgment, they did let the Internet in, but instead of blogs ridiculing government propaganda, it's the goofy websites like lolcats that their youth are most interested in. (Rest assured: Soon enough, some think-tank report will announce that the age of "feline authoritarianism" is upon us.) Those of us concerned about the future of democracy around the globe must stop dreaming and face reality: The Internet has provided so many cheap and easily available entertainment fixes to those living under authoritarianism that it has become considerably harder to get people to care about politics at all. The Huxleyan dimension of authoritarian control has mostly been lost on policymakers and commentators, who, thanks to the influence of such critics of modern capitalism as Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno, are mostly accustomed to noticing it only in their own democratic societies. Such bland glorification of those living under authoritarianism will inevitably lead to bad policies. If the ultimate Western objective is inciting a revolution or at least raising the level of political debate, the truth is that providing people with tools to circumvent censorship will be nearly as effective as giving someone with no appreciation of modern art a one-year pass to a museum. In 99 percent of cases, it's not going to work. This is not an argument against museums or anti-censorship tools; it's simply a call to use strategies that are free of utopian visions.

The Trinity of Authoritarianism

Granted, this “control by entertainment” approach is not going to work for everyone in authoritarian societies; some people already have so many grudges against their governments that flooding them with entertainment would not change their minds. In addition, Western governments and foundations will always find ways to politicize the locals from the outside, even if it involves fueling ethnic or religious tensions, a foolproof way to spark hatred in the age of YouTube. Thus, if only to maintain power over those who have preserved the ability to think for themselves, some Orwellian elements of political control will need to be present. Despite the reductionist models that have made many in the West believe that information can destroy authoritarianism, information also plays an instrumental role in enabling propaganda, censorship, and surveillance, the three main pillars of Orwell-style authoritarian control.

The Internet hasn’t changed the composition of this “trinity of authoritarianism,” but it has brought significant changes to how each of these three activities is practiced. The decentralized nature of the Internet may have made comprehensive censorship much harder, but it may have also made propaganda more effective, as government messages can now be spread through undercover government-run blogs. The opportunity to cheaply encrypt their online communications may have made “professional” activists more secure, but the proliferation of Web 2.0 services—and especially social networking—has turned “amateur” activists into easier targets for surveillance.

While there is nothing we in the West can do about the growing appeal of YouTube and lolcats—online entertainment is poised to remain an important, if indirect, weapon in the authoritarian arsenal—it’s possible to do something about each of those three authoritarian pillars. The danger here, of course, is that Western leaders might, once again, frame the solutions in intimately familiar Cold War terms, where the default response to the censorship practices of the Soviet Union was to blast even more information through the likes of Radio Free Europe.

This is an urge that needs to be resisted. The strategy behind the existence of Radio Free Europe and other similar broadcasting services during the Cold War was relatively straightforward. By funding more radio broadcasts, Western policymakers wanted to ensure that authoritarian propaganda would be countered, if not weakened; the draconian system of censorship would be undermined; and more listeners would doubt the central premises of communism as a result.

With technologies like the radio, it was relatively easy to grasp how certain inputs produced certain outputs. Thus, when the Soviet authorities were jamming its radio stations, the West reacted by turning up the volume—in part because, being in charge of all the programming, it was confident that exposure to its broadcasts would have the desired effect of politicizing the masses. The Soviets couldn’t just take the Western radio signal and use it to fight back, nor could listeners avoid political programming and opt for entertainment only (as already stated, not all Western radio programs were political, but even lifestyle shows were usually aimed at revealing the moral bankruptcy of the Soviet system).

There is no such certainty about the Internet; the West has far less command over it as an instrument than it did in the case of radio. The Internet is a much more capricious technology, producing side effects that can weaken the propaganda system but enhance the power of the surveillance apparatus or, alternatively, that can help to evade censorship but only at the expense of making the public more susceptible to propaganda. The Internet has made the three information pillars of authoritarianism much more interconnected, so Western efforts to undermine one pillar might ruin its efforts to do something about the other two.

Take one example: While it is tempting to encourage everyone to flock to social networking sites and blogs to avoid the control of the censors, it would also play into the hands of those in charge of surveillance and propaganda. The more connections between activists it can identify, the better for the government, while the more trust users have in blogs and social networks, the easier it is to use those networks to

promote carefully disguised government messages and boost the propaganda apparatus. The only way to avoid making painful mistakes and strengthening authoritarianism in the process of promoting Internet freedom is to carefully examine how surveillance, censorship, and propaganda strategies have changed in the Internet era.

chapter four

Censors and Sensibilities



Western propaganda produced during the Cold War may not have been very convincing, but it was effective on at least one level: It cultivated a certain myth of authoritarianism that is hard to dispel a full decade into the twenty-first century. Many Western observers still imagine authoritarian states to be populated by hyperactive doubles of Arthur Koestler—smart, uncompromising in the face of terror, eager to take on existential risks in the name of freedom—while being governed by an intractable array of ridiculous Disney characters—stupid, distracted, utterly uninterested in their own survival, and constantly on the verge of group suicide. Struggle and opposition are the default conditions of the former; passivity and incompetence are the default condition of the latter. All it takes to change the world, then, is to link the rebels with each other, expose them to a stream of shocking statistics they have never seen, and hand out a few shiny gadgets. Bingo! A revolution is already on its way, for perpetual revolt, according to this view, is the natural condition of authoritarianism.

This highly stylized account of modern authoritarianism tells us more about Western biases than it does about modern authoritarian

regimes. The persistence of modern authoritarianism can be explained by a whole variety of factors—energy endowment, little or no previous experience with democratic forms of rule, covert support from immoral Western democracies, bad neighbors—but an uninformed citizenry that cries out to be liberated by an electronic bombing of factoids and punchy tweets is typically not one of them. Most citizens of modern-day Russia or China do not go to bed reading *Darkness at Noon* only to wake up to the jingle of Voice of America or Radio Free Europe; chances are that much like their Western counterparts, they, too, wake up to the same annoying Lady Gaga song blasting from their iPhones. While they might have a strong preference for democracy, many of them take it to mean orderly justice rather than the presence of free elections and other institutions that are commonly associated with the Western model of liberal democracy. For many of them, being able to vote is not as valuable as being able to receive education or medical care without having to bribe a dozen greedy officials. Furthermore, citizens of authoritarian states do not necessarily perceive their undemocratically installed governments to be illegitimate, for legitimacy can be derived from things other than elections; jingoist nationalism (China), fear of a foreign invasion (Iran), fast rates of economic development (Russia), low corruption (Belarus), and efficiency of government services (Singapore) have all been successfully co-opted for these purposes.

Thus, to understand the impact of the Internet on authoritarianism, one needs to look beyond the Web's obvious uses by opponents of the government and study how it has affected legitimacy-boosting aspects of modern authoritarian rule as well. Take a closer look at the blogospheres in almost any authoritarian regime, and you are likely to discover that they are teeming with nationalism and xenophobia, sometimes so poisonous that official government policy looks cosmopolitan in comparison. What impact such radicalization of nationalist opinion would have on the governments' legitimacy is hard to predict, but things don't look particularly bright for the kind of flawless democratization that some expect from the Internet's arrival. Likewise, bloggers uncovering and publicizing corruption in local governments could be—and are—easily co-opted by higher-ranking politicians and made part of the anti-

corruption campaign. The overall impact on the strength of the regime in this case is hard to determine; the bloggers may be diminishing the power of local authorities but boosting the power of the federal government. Without first developing a clear understanding of how power is distributed between the center and the periphery and how changes in this distribution affect the process of democratization, it is hard to predict what role the Internet might play.

Or look at how Wikis and social networking sites, not to mention various government online initiatives, are improving the performance of both governments and businesses they patronize. Today's authoritarian leaders, obsessed with plans to modernize their economies, spew out more buzzwords per sentence than an average editorial in *Harvard Business Review* (Vladislav Surkov, one of the Kremlin's leading ideologues and the godfather of Russia's Silicon Valley, has recently confessed that he is fascinated by "crowdsourcing"). Authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, for example, have been actively promoting a host of e-government initiatives. But the reason why they pursue such modernization is not because they want to shorten the distance between the citizen and the bureaucrat but because they see it as a way to attract funds from foreign donors (the likes of IMF and the World Bank) while also removing the unnecessary red-tape barriers to economic growth.

Dress Your Own Windows

Authoritarian survival increasingly involves power sharing and institution building, two processes that many political scientists have traditionally neglected. Even such shrewd observers of modern politics as Zbigniew Brzezinski and Carl Friedrich told readers of their 1965 classic, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, to forget institutions altogether: "The reader may wonder why we do not discuss the 'structure of government,' or perhaps 'the constitution' of these totalitarian systems. The reason is that these structures are of very little importance."

Such rigid conceptual frameworks may have helped in understanding Stalinism, but this is too simplistic of a perspective to explain much of what is going on inside today's authoritarian states, which are busy

organizing elections, setting up parliaments, and propping up their judiciaries. If authoritarian regimes are bold enough to allow elections, for reasons of their own, what makes us think they wouldn't also allow blogs for reasons that Western analysts may not be able to understand yet?

"Institutions, students of authoritarianism often claim, are but 'window-dressing,'" writes Adam Przeworski, a professor of political science at New York University. "But why would some autocrats care to dress their own windows?" Why, indeed? In the last thirty years, political scientists have unearthed plenty of possible motivations: Some rulers want to identify the most talented bureaucrats by having them compete in sham elections; some want to co-opt their potential enemies by offering them a stake in the survival of the regime and placing them in impotent parliaments and other feeble, quasi-representative institutions; some simply want to talk the democracy talk that helps them raise funds from the West, and institutions—especially if those are easily recognizable institutions commonly associated with liberal democracy—are all the West usually asks for.

But it seems that the most innovative dictators not only organize sham elections but also manage to surround themselves with the gloss of modern technology. How else to explain a 2009 parliamentary election in the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, where the government decided to install five hundred Web cams at election stations? It made for good PR, but it didn't make the elections any more democratic, for most manipulations had occurred before the election campaign even started. And such a move may have had more sinister implications. As Bashir Suleymanly, executive director of Azerbaijan's Elections Monitoring and Democracy Teaching Center, told reporters on the eve of the election, "local executive bodies and organizations that are financed from the state budget instruct their employees for whom they should give their vote and frighten them by the webcams that record their participation and whom they vote for." Russian authorities, too, believe that the kind of transparency fostered by the Web cams may bolster their democratic credentials. After devastating summer fires destroyed many villages in the heat wave of 2010, the Kremlin installed Web cams

at the building sites for new houses, so that the process could be observed in real time (that didn't stop complaints from the future owners of the houses; living in the provinces, they didn't have computers, nor did they know how to use the Internet).

Institutions matter, and dictators love building them, if only to prolong their stay in power. The relative usefulness of the Internet—especially the blogosphere—has to be analyzed through a similar institutional lens. Some bloggers are simply too useful to get rid of. Many of them are talented, creative, and extremely well-educated individuals—and only short-sighted dictators would choose to fight them, when they can be used more strategically instead. For example, it is much more useful to build an environment where these bloggers can serve as symbolic tokens of "liberalization," packaged for either domestic or foreign consumption, or at least where they can be counted on to help generate new ideas and ideologies for otherwise intellectually starving governments.

Not surprisingly, efforts to institutionalize blogging have already begun in many authoritarian states. Officials in some Gulf states are calling for the creation of blogging associations, while one of Russia's top bureaucrats recently proposed to set up a "Bloggers' Chamber" that can set standards of acceptable behavior in the blogosphere, so that the Kremlin does not have to resort to formal censorship. In reality, of course, such blogging chambers are likely to be staffed by pro-Kremlin bloggers, which is yet another way to hide the fact that the Russian government manages to practice Internet control without formally banning all that many websites. Such efforts may fail—and the West can only hope that they do—but they suggest that authoritarian governments have an operational view of blogging that is light-years ahead of the idea of bloggers as twenty-first-century dissidents.

If we view all Internet activity in authoritarian states as being primarily political and oppositional, we are likely to miss much of what makes it so rich and diverse. While the Western media pay a lot of attention to how China's "human flesh search engines"—people who name and shame misbehaving public officials and other Internet users by publicizing their personal details—are making the Chinese government more accountable, they rarely report that the Chinese government, too,

has found ways to co-opt these same “search engines” to score propaganda points. When in March 2010 an Internet user from the Chinese city of Changzhou complained about pollution in Beitang River and accused the chief of the local environmental protection bureau of failing to do his job, demanding his resignation, the local administration mobilized the local “human flesh search engines” to track down the complainer, so that he could be rewarded with 2,000 yuan.

One of the temptations that Western observers should avoid is to interpret the fact that authoritarian governments are adjusting their operating methods as a sign of democratization. This is a common fallacy among those who do not yet understand that it is perpetual change, not stagnation, that has enabled authoritarianism to survive for so long. A modern authoritarian state is much like the Ship of Theseus in Greek mythology: It’s been rebuilt so many times that even those navigating it are no longer sure if any of the original wood remains.

Although prominent Western blogger-academics like *Instapundit’s* Glenn Reynolds laud the power of mobile phones and argue that “converting an unresponsive and murderous Stalinist/Maoist tyranny into something that responds to cellphone calls is not an achievement to be sneezed at,” we should not just pat ourselves on the back, clap hands, and praise the inexorable march of Internet freedom. A tyranny that responds to cellphone calls is still a tyranny, and its leaders may even enjoy fiddling with their iPhone apps. Nor should we automatically assume that tyrannies do not want to respond to cellphone calls. The supposed gains of “democratization” may look considerably less impressive if they are seen as indirectly facilitating the survival of dictatorships, even if in slightly modified form.

The Kremlin Likes Blogs and So Should You

Contrary to the usual Western stereotypes, modern dictators are not just a loose bunch of utterly confused loonies lounging around in their information-resistant bunkers, counting their riches, Scrooge McDuck-style, and waiting to get deposed, oblivious to what is happening outside. Quite the opposite: They are usually active consumers and

producers of information. In fact, finding ways to understand and gather information—especially about threats to the regime—is one invariable feature of authoritarian survival. But dictators can’t just go and interview random people in the streets; they almost always have to go to intermediaries, usually the secret police.

This, however, rarely gives an accurate view of what’s happening, if only because nobody wants to take responsibility for the inevitable malfunctions of the authoritarian system. That’s why throughout history rulers always tried to diversify their news sources. In fact, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s Internet strategy has a rich intellectual tradition to draw on. Back in the nineteenth century, Iran’s monarch Nasir al-Din Shah was enthusiastically installing telegraph lines throughout the country, requiring *daily* reports even from the most minor bureaucrats in the tiniest of villages, primarily as a means of cross-checking reports received from their higher-ups. This was in line with the advice offered by Iran’s eleventh-century vizier Nizam al-Mulk in his celebrated *Book of Government*: Each king should have dual sources of information.

The noted social scientist Ithiel de Sola Pool, one of the leading thinkers about technology and democracy of the last century, played an important role in shaping how the West understands the role that information plays in authoritarian states. “The authoritarian state is inherently fragile and will quickly collapse if information flows freely,” wrote Pool, giving rise to a view that has become widely shared—and, undoubtedly, made Pool and his numerous followers overestimate the liberating power of information. (Pool, a disillusioned ex-Trotskyite, also famously overestimated the power of Western broadcasting, using letters that Eastern Europeans sent to Radio Free Europe as one of his main sources.) Such technological utopianism stems from a rather shallow reading of the politics and regime dynamics of authoritarian states. For if one presumes, like Pool, that authoritarian structures rest on little else than the suppression of information, as soon as the West finds a way to poke holes in those structures, it follows that democracy promotion boils down to finding ways to unleash the information flood on the oppressed.

On closer examination, views like Pool’s appear counterintuitive and for good reason. Surely there are benefits to having access to more

sources of information, if only because a regime can flag emerging threats. (On this point, Iranian rulers of the past were a bit more sophisticated than many contemporary Western academics.) That diverse and independent information can help heighten—or at least preserve—their power has not been lost on those presiding over authoritarian states. One insightful observer of the final years of the Soviet era remarked in 1987: “There surely must be days—maybe the morning after Chernobyl—when Gorbachev wishes he could buy a Kremlin equivalent of the *Washington Post* and find out what is going on in his socialist wonderland.” (Gorbachev did acknowledge that Western radio broadcasts were instrumental in helping him follow the short-lived putsch in August 1991, when he was locked up in his Sochi dacha.)

Well, there is no need to hunt for the Russian equivalents of the *Washington Post* anymore. Even in the absence of a truly free press, Dmitry Medvedev can learn almost everything he needs from the diverse world of Russian blogs. As he himself has confessed, this is how he starts many of his mornings. (Medvedev is also a big fan of ebooks and the iPad.) And he doesn’t have to spend much time searching for complaints. Anyone with a grudge against a local bureaucrat can leave a complaint as a comment on Medvedev’s blog, a popular practice in Russia. And to score some bonus propaganda points, Medvedev’s subordinates like to take highly publicized action in response to such complaints, replacing the crumbling infrastructure and firing the corrupt bureaucrats. This, however, is done selectively, more for the propaganda value it creates than for the purpose of fixing the system. No one knows what happens to the complaints that are too critical or border on whistle-blowing, but quite a few angry messages are removed from the blog very quickly. (Vladimir Putin, Medvedev’s predecessor as president and currently Russia’s prime minister, also likes to collect complaints by having people call in to his yearly TV address; when in 2007 a police officer told the switchboard operator he wanted to complain about corruption in his unit, his call was traced, and he was reprimanded.) Similarly, while the Chinese authorities are blocking openly antigovernment content, they appear quite tolerant of blog posts that expose local corruption.

Authorities in Singapore regularly monitor blogs that provide policy criticism and claim to incorporate suggestions from netizens into their policymaking. Thus, while the themes of many blogs in modern-day authoritarian regimes are clearly not to the governments’ taste, there are plenty of others they approve of or even try to promote.

Dictators and Their Dilemmas

While it’s becoming clear that few authoritarian regimes are interested in completely shutting down all communications, if only because they want to stay abreast of emerging threats, censorship of at least some content is inevitable. For the last three decades, conventional wisdom suggested that the need to censor put authoritarian regimes into a corner: They either censored and thus suffered the economic consequences, for censorship is incompatible with globalization, or they didn’t censor and thus risked a revolution. Hillary Clinton said as much in her Internet freedom speech: “Countries that censor news and information must recognize that from an economic standpoint, there is no distinction between censoring political speech and commercial speech. If businesses in your nations are denied access to either type of information, it will inevitably impact on growth.” Reporting on the role of technology in powering Iran’s Twitter Revolution, the *New York Times* expressed a similar opinion: “Because digital technologies are so critical today to modern economies, repressive governments would pay a high price for shutting them out completely, if that were still possible.”

This binary view—that dictators cannot globalize unless they open up their networks to hordes of international consultants and investment bankers scouring their lands in search of the next acquisition target—has become known as “dictator’s dilemma” and found many supporters among policymakers, especially when the latter discuss the benevolent role of the Internet. But the existence of a direct connection between economic growth and modern-day Internet censorship is not self-evident. Could it be yet another poorly examined and rather harmful assumption that stems from the Cold War?

In 1985 George Schultz, the then U.S. secretary of state, was one of the first to articulate the popular view when he said that “totalitarian societies face a dilemma: either they try to stifle these technologies and thereby fall further behind in the new industrial revolution, or else they permit these technologies and see their totalitarian control inevitably eroded.” And those governments were doomed, according to Schultz: “They do not have a choice, because they will never be able entirely to block the tide of technological advance.” Schultz’s view, expressed in a high-profile article in *Foreign Affairs*, gained a lot of supporters. A 1989 editorial in the *New Republic* just a week after the Chinese government cleared the protestors out of Tiananmen Square argued that the choice facing the dictators was either to “let the people think for themselves and speak their minds . . . —or smell your economy rot.”

This was music to the ears of many Eastern Europeans at the time, and the ensuing collapse of the Soviet system seemed to vindicate the *New Republic’s* determinism. In fact, such predictions were the intellectual product of the optimism of that era. Anyone following the zeitgeist of the late 1980s and early 1990s couldn’t have missed the connection between two popular theories at the time, one pertaining to technology and one to politics, that, in a rather mysterious twist, bore virtually the same name. One theory, developed by the futurist Alvin Toffler, posited that the rapid technological change of the period would give rise to the “Third Wave Society,” marked by democratized access to knowledge and the dawn of the information age. For Toffler, information technology followed two other revolutionary waves, agriculture and industrialization, ushering in a completely new period in human history.

The second theory, developed by the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, posited that the period was marked by the emergence of “the third wave” of worldwide democratization, with more and more countries choosing democratic forms of governance. (It was “third” because, according to Huntington, it followed the first wave, which lasted from the early nineteenth century until the rise of fascism in Italy, and the second, which lasted from the end of the Second World War until the mid-1960s.)

It was too tempting not to see those two third waves as coinciding at some point in recent history, and 1989 looked like the best candidate. Such views often implied the existence of a strong causality between the march of democracy around the globe and the onset of the information revolution, a relationship that was often inferred but only rarely demonstrated. “Dictator’s dilemma” has become a useful moniker, a way to capture the inevitability of authoritarian collapse when faced with fax machines, photocopiers, and so forth. Following George Schultz’s lead, between 1990 and 2010 plenty of senior U.S. government officials, including James Baker, Madeleine Albright, and Robert Gates, spoke of “dictator’s dilemma” as if it were common sense. But it was Columbia University’s outspoken economist Jagdish Bhagwati who captured the essence of “dictator’s dilemma” most eloquently: “The PC [personal computer] is incompatible with the C.P. [Communist Party].” As a free-spirited intellectual Bhagwati can, of course, believe whatever he wants without having to pay attention to the developments in the real world, but political leaders don’t have that luxury, if only because the effectiveness of future policies is at stake. The danger of succumbing to the logic of “dictator’s dilemma,” as well as other similar beliefs about the inevitable triumph of capitalism or the end of history, is that it suffuses political leaders with a dangerous sense of historic inevitability and encourages a lazy approach to policymaking. If authoritarian states are facing such a serious, even lethal dilemma, why risk tipping the scales with some thoughtless interventions? Such unwarranted optimism inevitably leads to inaction and paralysis.

Thomas Friedman, the *New York Times* foreign affairs columnist, in his typical fashion, trivialized—and did much to popularize—the “dictator’s dilemma” fallacy by coining a new buzzword: “Microchip Immune Deficiency Syndrome” (MIDS). MIDS is a “disease that can afflict any bloated, overweight, sclerotic system in the post-Cold War era. MIDS is usually contracted by countries and companies that fail to inoculate themselves against changes brought about by the microchip and the democratization of technology, finance and information.” Thanks to the Internet, authoritarian governments are doomed: “Within a few

years, every citizen of the world will be able to comparison shop between his own . . . government and the one next door." (For some reason, however, Americans, with all their unfettered access to the Internet, don't hail Friedman's advice, failing to do much government-shopping on their own and see that other governments have far more reasonable approaches to, for example, imprisoning their citizens.) Nicholas Kristof, Friedman's more sober colleague at the *New York Times*, is also a strong believer in the inevitability of the information-driven authoritarian collapse, writing that "by giving the Chinese people broadband," the Chinese leaders are "digging the Communist Party's grave."

Thus, it's still common to assume that the Internet would eventually tear authoritarianism apart by dealing it a thousand lethal information blows. Tough leaders can't survive without information technology, but they will crumble even if they let it in, for their citizens, desperate for Disneyland, Big Macs, and MTV, will rush to the streets demanding fair elections. The problem with this view is that when it comes to assessing the empirical evidence and considering the case of the Internet, it's hard to think of a state that actually didn't survive the challenges posed by the dilemma. Save for North Korea, all authoritarian states have accepted the Internet, with China having more Internet users than there are people in the United States. Where the pundits and the policymakers have failed is in understanding the sophistication and flexibility of the censorship apparatus built on top of the Internet. One crucial assumption behind "dictator's dilemma" was that it would be impossible to design precise censorship mechanisms that could block openly political Internet activity and yet allow any Internet activity—perhaps even make it faster—that helped to foster economic growth. This assumption has proved to be false: Governments have mastered the art of keyword-based filtering, thus gaining the ability to block websites based on the URLs and even the text of their pages. The next logical stage would be for governments to develop ways in which to restrict access to content based on concrete demographics and specific user behavior, figuring who exactly is trying to access what, for what possible

reason, what else they have accessed in the previous two weeks, and so forth before making the decision whether to block or allow access to a given page.

In the not so distant future, a banker perusing nothing but *Reuters* and *Financial Times* and with other bankers as her online friends, would be left alone to do anything she wants, even browse Wikipedia pages about human rights violations. In contrast, a person of unknown occupation, who is occasionally reading *Financial Times* but is also connected to five well-known political activists through Facebook, and who has written blog comments that included words like "democracy" and "freedom," would only be allowed to visit government-run websites (or, if she is an important intelligence target, she'll be allowed to visit other sites, with her online activities closely monitored).

When Censors Understand You Better Than Your Mom Does

Is such customization of censorship actually possible? Would censors know so much about us that they might eventually be able to make automated decisions about not just each individual but each individual acting in a particular context?

If online advertising is anything to judge by, such behavioral precision is not far away. Google already bases the ads it shows us on our searches and the text of our emails; Facebook aspires to make its ads much more fine-grained, taking into account what kind of content we have previously "liked" on other sites and what our friends are "liking" and buying online. Imagine building censorship systems that are as detailed and fine-tuned to the information needs of their users as the behavioral advertising we encounter every day. The only difference between the two is that one system learns everything about us to show us more relevant advertisements, while the other one learns everything about us to ban us from accessing relevant pages. Dictators have been somewhat slow to realize that the customization mechanisms underpinning so much of Web 2.0 can be easily turned to purposes

that are much more nefarious than behavioral advertising, but they are fast learners.

By paying so much attention to the most conventional and certainly blandest way of Internet control—blocking access to particular URLs—we may have missed more fundamental shifts in the field. Internet censorship is poised to grow in both depth, looking deeper and deeper into the kinds of things we do online and even offline, and breadth, incorporating more and more information indicators before a decision to censor something is made.

When in the summer of 2009 the Chinese government announced that it would require all computers sold in the country to have one special piece of software called GreenDam installed on them, most media accounts focused on how monumental the plan seemed to be or how poorly the authorities handled GreenDam's rollout. As a result of heavy domestic and international criticism, the plan was scrapped, but millions of computers in Chinese schools and Internet cafés still continue to use the software to this day.

Internal politics aside, GreenDam stood out for its innovative embrace of predictive censorship, a precursor of highly customized censorship that awaits us in the near future. It went beyond mechanically blocking access to a given list of banned resources to actually analyzing what the user was doing, guessing at whether such behavior was allowed or not. It was definitely not the smartest software on the Internet; some users even reported that it blocked their access to any websites starting with the letter *f* in their URL.

It's not the implementation but the underlying principle that should have stood out. GreenDam is extremely invasive, taking a thorough look at the nature of the activities users engage in. It is programmed to study users' computer behavior—from browsing websites to composing text files to viewing pictures—and try to prevent them from engaging in activities it doesn't like (mostly by shutting down the corresponding applications, e.g., the Internet browser or word processor). For example, the color pink is GreenDam's shorthand for pornography; if it detects too much pink in the photos being viewed, it shuts down the

photo-viewing application (while photos of nude dark-skinned people, perversely, pass the civility test).

Most disturbingly, GreenDam also features an Internet back door through which software can communicate with its "headquarters" and share behavioral insights about the user under surveillance. This could teach other GreenDam computers on the network about new ways to identify unwanted content. GreenDam is a censorship system with immense potential for distributed self-learning: The moment it discovers that someone types "demokracy" instead of "democracy" to avoid detection, no other users will be able to take advantage of that loophole.

Think of this as the Global Brain of Censorship. Every second it can imbibe the insights that come from millions of users who are trying to subvert the system and put them to work almost immediately to make such subversions technically impossible. GreenDam is a poor implementation of an extremely powerful—and dangerous—concept.

Time to Unfriend

But governments do not need to wait until breakthroughs in artificial intelligence to make more accurate decisions about what it is they need to censor. One remarkable difference between the Internet and other media is that online information is hyperlinked. To a large extent, all those links act as nano-endorsements. If someone links to a particular page, that page is granted some importance. Google has managed to aggregate all these nano-endorsements—making the number of incoming links the key predictor of relevance for search results—and build a mighty business around it.

Hyperlinks also make it possible to infer the context in which particular bits of information appear online without having to know the meaning of those bits. If a dozen antigovernment blogs link to a PDF published on a blog that was previously unknown to the Internet police, the latter may assume that the document is worth blocking without ever reading it. The links—the "nano-endorsements" from antigovernment bloggers—speak for themselves. The PDF is simply guilty by association.

Thanks to Twitter, Facebook, and other social media, such associations are getting much easier for the secret police to trace.

If authoritarian governments master the art of aggregating the most popular links that their opponents share on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media sites, they can create a very elegant, sophisticated, and, most disturbingly, accurate solution to their censorship needs. Even though the absolute amount of information—or the number of links, for that matter—may be growing, it does not follow that there will be less “censorship” in the world. It would simply become more fine-tuned. If anything, there might be less one-size-fits-all “wasteful” censorship, but this is hardly a cause for celebration.

The belief that the Internet is too big to censor is dangerously naïve. As the Web becomes even more social, nothing prevents governments—or any other interested players—from building censorship engines powered by recommendation technology similar to that of Amazon and Netflix. The only difference, however, would be that instead of being prompted to check out the “recommended” pages, we’d be denied access to them. The “social graph”—a collection of all our connections across different sites (think of a graph that shows everyone you are connected to on different sites across the Web, from Facebook to Twitter to YouTube)—a concept so much beloved by the “digerati,” could encircle all of us.

The main reason why censorship methods have not yet become more social is because much of our Internet browsing is still done anonymously. When we visit different sites, the people who administer them cannot easily tell who we are. There is absolutely no guarantee that this will still be the case five years from now; two powerful forces may destroy online anonymity. From the commercial end, we see stronger integration between social networks and different websites—you can now spot Facebook’s “Like” button on many sites—so there are growing incentives to tell sites who you are. Many of us would eagerly trade our privacy for a discount coupon to be used at the Apple store. From the government end, growing concerns over child pornography, copyright violations, cybercrime, and cyberwarfare also make it

more likely that there will be more ways in which we will need to prove our identity online.

The future of Internet control is thus a function of numerous (and rather complex) business and social forces; sadly, many of them originating in free and democratic societies. Western governments and foundations can’t solve the censorship problem by just building more tools; they need to identify, publicly debate, and, if necessary, legislate against each of those numerous forces. The West excels at building and supporting effective tools to pierce through the firewalls of authoritarian governments, but it is also skilled at letting many of its corporations disregard the privacy of their users, often with disastrous implications for those who live in oppressive societies. Very little about the currently fashionable imperative to promote Internet freedom suggests that Western policymakers are committed to resolving the problems that they themselves have helped to create.

We Don’t Censor; We Outsource!

Another reason why so much of today’s Internet censorship is invisible is because it’s not the governments who practice it. While in most cases it’s enough to block access to a particular critical blog post, it’s even better to remove that blog post from the Internet in its entirety. While governments do not have such mighty power, companies that enable users to publish such blog posts on their sites can do it in a blink. Being able to force companies to police the Web according to a set of some broad guidelines is a dream come true for any government. It’s the companies who incur all the costs, it’s the companies who do the dirty work, and it’s the companies who eventually get blamed by the users. Companies also are more likely to catch unruly content, as they know their online communities better than government censors. Finally, no individual can tell companies how to run those communities, so most appeals to freedom of expression are pointless.

Not surprisingly, this is the direction in which Chinese censorship is evolving. According to research done by Rebecca MacKinnon, who

studies the Chinese Internet at New America Foundation and is a former CNN bureau chief in Beijing, censorship of Chinese user-generated content is “highly decentralized,” while its “implementation is left to the Web companies themselves.”

To prove this, in mid-2008 she set up anonymous accounts on a dozen Chinese blog platforms and published more than a hundred posts on controversial subjects, from corruption to AIDS to Tibet, to each of them. MacKinnon’s objective was to test if and how soon they would be deleted. Responses differed widely across companies: The most vigilant ones deleted roughly half of all posts, while the least vigilant company censored only one. There was little coherence to the companies’ behavior, but then this is what happens when governments say “censor” but don’t spell out what it is that needs to be censored, leaving it for the scared executives to figure out. The more leeway companies have in interpreting the rules, the more uncertainty there is as to whether a certain blog post will be removed or allowed to stay. This Kafkaesque uncertainty can eventually cause more harm than censorship itself, for it’s hard to plan an activist campaign if you cannot be sure that your content will remain available.

This also suggests that, as bad as Google and Facebook may look to us, they still probably undercensor compared to most companies operating in authoritarian countries. Global companies are usually unhappy to take on a censorship role, for it might cost them dearly. Nor are they happy to face a barrage of accusations of censorship in their own home countries. (Local companies, on the other hand, couldn’t care less: Social networking sites in Azerbaijan probably have no business in the United States or Western Europe, nor are their names likely to be mispronounced at congressional hearings.)

But this is one battle that the West is already losing. Users usually prefer local rather than global services; those are usually faster, more relevant, easier to use, and in line with local cultural norms. Look at the Internet market in most authoritarian states, and you’ll probably find at least five local alternatives to each prominent Web 2.0 start-up from Silicon Valley. For a total online population of more than 300 million,

Facebook’s 14,000 Chinese users, by one 2009 count, are just a drop in the sea (or, to be exact, 0.00046 percent).

Companies, however, are not the only intermediaries that could be pressured into deleting unwanted content. RuNet (the colloquial name for the Russian-speaking Internet), for example, heavily relies on “communities,” which are somewhat akin to Facebook groups, and those are run by dedicated moderators. Most of the socially relevant online activism in Russia happens on just one platform, LiveJournal. When in 2008 the online community of automobile lovers on LiveJournal became the place to share photos and reports from a wave of unexpected protests organized by unhappy drivers in the far eastern Russian city of Vladivostok, its administrators immediately received requests from FSB, KGB’s successor, urging them to delete the reports. They complied, although they complained about the matter in a subsequent report that they posted to the community’s webpage (within just a few hours that post disappeared as well). Formally, though, nothing has been blocked; this is the kind of invisible censorship that is most difficult to fight.

The more intermediaries—whether human or corporate—are involved in publishing and disseminating a particular piece of information, the more points of control exist for quietly removing or altering that information. The early believers in “dictator’s dilemma” have grossly underestimated the need for online intermediaries. Someone still has to provide access to the Internet, host a blog or a website, moderate an online community, or even make that community visible in search engines. As long as all those entities have to be tied to a nation state, there will be ways to pressure them into accepting and facilitating highly customized censorship that will have no impact on economic growth.

Wise Crowds, Unwise Causes

Thailand’s extremely strict *lèse-majesté* laws make it illegal to publish—including in blog and tweet form—anything that may offend the country’s royal family. But effectively policing the country’s rapidly expanding blogosphere has proved very challenging for the Thai police.

In early 2009 a Thai MP loyal to the king proposed a new solution to this intractable problem. A new site, called ProtectTheKing.net, was set up so that Thai users could report links to any websites they believed to be offensive to the monarchy. According to the BBC, the government blocked 5,000 submitted links in the first twenty-four hours. Not surprisingly, the site's creators "forgot" to provide a way in which to complain about sites that were blocked in error.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia allows its citizens to report any links they find offensive; 1,200 of those are submitted to the country's Communications & Information Technology Commission on a daily basis. This allows the Saudi government to achieve a certain efficiency in the censorship process. According to *Business Week*, in 2008 the Commission's censorship wing employed only twenty-five people, although many of them came from top Western universities, including Harvard and Carnegie Mellon.

The most interesting part about the Saudi censorship scheme is that it at least informs the user why a website has been blocked; many other countries simply show a bland message like "the page cannot be displayed," making it impossible to discern whether the site is blocked or simply unavailable because of some technical glitches. In the Saudi case, banned porn websites carry a message that explains in detail the reasons for the ban, referencing a *Duke Law Journal* article on pornography written by the American legal scholar Cass Sunstein and a 1,960-page study conducted by the U.S. attorney general's Commission on Pornography in 1986. (At least for most nonlawyers, those are probably far less satisfying than the porn pages they were seeking to visit.)

The practice of "crowdsourcing" censorship is becoming popular in democracies as well. Both the British and the French authorities have similar schemes for their citizens to report child pornography and several other kinds of illegal content. As there are more and more websites and blogs to check for illegal material, it's quite likely that such crowdsourcing schemes will become more common.

The Thai, Saudi, and British authorities rely on citizens' goodwill, but a new scheme in China actually offers monetary awards to anyone submitting links to online pornography. Found a porn site? Report it

to the authorities, and get paid. The scheme may have backfired, however. When it was first introduced in early 2010, there was also a considerable spike in those searching for pornography. Who knows how many of the reported videos have first been downloaded and saved to local hard drives? More important, how many pages containing non-sexual content could be found and dealt with in such a manner?

In some cases, the state does not need to become directly involved at all. Tech-savvy groups of individuals loyal to a particular cause or national government will harness their networks to censor their opponents, usually by dismantling their groups on social networking sites. The most famous of such networks is a mysterious online organization that calls itself Jewish Internet Defense Force (JIDF). This pro-Israel advocacy group made headlines by compiling lists of anti-Israeli Facebook groups, infiltrating them to become their administrators, and ultimately disabling them. One of its most remarkable accomplishments was deleting nearly 110,000 members from a 118,000-strong Arabic-language group sympathetic to Hezbollah. In some such cases, Facebook administrators are quick enough to intervene before the group is completely destroyed, but often they aren't. The online social capital that took months to develop goes to waste in a matter of hours. It's important to understand that increasingly it is communities—not just individual bloggers—that produce value on today's Internet. Thus modern censorship will increasingly go beyond just blocking access to particular content and aim to erode and destroy entire online communities instead.

Denial-of-Philosophy

If philosophy is your passion, Saudi Arabia would not top your list of places to spend a year abroad. Perhaps because the discipline encourages independent thinking and questioning of authority (or simply aggravates the problem of unemployment), the subject is banned at universities, and so are philosophy books. Explaining his resistance to the introduction of philosophy as a subject in the Saudi high school curriculum, the director of planning at the Jeddah Educational Administration noted in

December 2005 that “philosophy is a subject derived from the Greeks and the Romans. . . . We do not need this kind of philosophy because the Holy Quran is rich in Islamic philosophy.”

The modern elements within Saudi Arabia’s civil society were hopeful of finally getting some autonomy in cyberspace. And their hopes were not in vain: The Internet quickly filled the void, with nearly free and easy access to philosophy books, video lectures, and scholarly magazines. But there was no centralized repository of links to such content, so several U.S.-educated Saudis started an Internet forum, *Tomaar*, to discuss all things related to philosophy and share links to interesting content. The site enjoyed tremendous success; in just a few months, the site branched out beyond philosophy, with its users discussing Middle East politics and controversial social issues (since the site was in Arabic, non-Saudi users frequented it as well). At its peak, the site had more than 12,000 active members, who contributed an average of 1,000 posts a day.

But it was a short-lived triumph. Before long, the Saudi government noticed the phenomenal success of *Tomaar* and quickly banned all Saudi users from accessing the site. This, however, was an easy problem to solve. In the last decade or so, plenty of tools had emerged to circumvent such government bans; their creation was fueled mostly by the excessive censorship of the Chinese authorities. In essence, governments cannot erase the content they do not like, especially if it’s hosted on a foreign server; what they can do is to ban their own nationals from accessing that content by requiring ISPs to simply stop serving requests for a particular URL. But it’s possible to trick the ISPs by connecting to a third-party computer and using that computer’s Internet connection to access the content you need; all that the government would see is that you are connected to some random computer on the Net, but they won’t know that you are accessing content they don’t like. *Tomaar*’s fans made good use of such censorship-circumvention tools and were able to use the site despite the ban. (Of course, once too many users connect to one computer or its address is publicized, the authorities may understand what is taking place and ban access to it as well.)

But their jubilation did not last long. Shortly thereafter the website became inaccessible to even those users who relied on censorship-circumvention tools. It appeared that the site was enjoying such popularity that it was simply overloaded with Internet traffic. The American company that hosted *Tomaar* wrote the site administrators to inform them that it was terminating their contract, making the site a “digital refugee.” Something eerie was happening, and *Tomaar*’s administrators could not figure out what it was (none of them was a techie—one worked as a salesman in a high-end consumer electronic store, and another was a financial consultant in a bank).

It took some time before it became clear that *Tomaar* was a target of a protracted cyber-attack that aimed to make the website unavailable. The type of attack in question—the so-called Distributed-Denial-of-Service (DDoS) attack—is an increasingly popular way of silencing one’s opponents. Much like pubs and salons, all websites have certain occupancy limits. Popular sites like CNN.com can handle millions of simultaneous sessions, while most amateur sites can barely handle a hundred or two hundred simultaneous visits. A DDoS attack seeks to take advantage of such resource constraints by sending fake visitors to targeted websites. Where do such fake visitors come from? They are generated by computers that have been infected with malware and viruses, thus allowing a third party to establish full command over them and use their resources however it sees fit. Nowadays, the capacity to launch such attacks is often bought and sold on eBay for a few hundred dollars.

Since the attack originates from thousands of computers, it’s almost always impossible to identify its mastermind. This was true in *Tomaar*’s case. While it seemed logical that the Saudi government would be interested in silencing the site, there is no concrete evidence to assert that connection. But *Tomaar*’s hosting company did not drop them for nothing: DDoS attacks eat a lot of traffic, it takes quite some time to clean up afterward, and it’s the hosting companies that have to pay the bills. This is how online dissent can easily turn into a preexisting condition. If you have something sensitive to say and it can attract DDoS attacks, most hosting companies would think twice before signing you

up as their client. Since businesses are also frequent targets of DDoS attacks, there exists a commercial market in protection services (for example, banning computers from certain parts of the world from being able to visit your site), but they sell at rates that are not affordable to most volunteer-funded sites. Eventually, Tomaar did find a new home, but cyber-attacks continued. The site was regularly down for one week out of four, with DDoS attacks eroding its community's spirit and draining the pockets of its founders, who were naïve enough to believe that online dissent is as cheap as their monthly hosting fee.

Cases like Tomaar's are increasingly common, especially among activist and human rights organizations. Burma's exiled media—Irrawaddy, Mizzima, and the Democratic Voice of Burma—all experienced major cyber-attacks (the heaviest wave occurred on the first anniversary of the Saffron Revolution in 2008); ditto the Belarusian oppositional site Charter97, the Russian independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* (the one that employed the slain Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya), the Kazakh oppositional newspaper *Respublika*, and even various local branches of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty.

Individual bloggers fall victims to such attacks as well. In August 2009, on the first anniversary of the Russian-Georgian war, Cyxymu, one of the most popular Georgian bloggers, found himself under such an intensive DDoS attack that it even took down powerful websites like Twitter and Facebook, where he had duplicate accounts. Here was a case of a dissenting voice who could not say what he wanted because all the platforms where he established online identities came under severe DDoS attacks and put immense pressure on the administrators running those platforms; they, of course, found it quite tempting to simply delete his account to enable all other users to continue with their business.

DDoS attacks present a serious and poorly understood threat to freedom of expression on the Internet, as they are increasingly used not only against the websites of institutions and companies but also against individual bloggers. In the past, conventional wisdom dictated that all it took to give voice to marginalized communities was to get them online and maybe pay their Internet bill. Not anymore. Being heard online—at least

beyond the first few tweets and blog posts—increasingly involves strategizing about server administration, creating back-up plans in case of a DDoS emergency, and even budgeting for extremely expensive anti-DDoS protection services.

The worst part about DDoS-type restrictions on freedom of expression is that they lead to significant undercounting of the total amount of Internet censorship around the world. Our traditional notion of censorship is still strongly influenced by the binary logic of “blocked/unblocked,” which in cases like those of Cyxymu or *Novaya Gazeta* simply do not make much sense. The sites may be technically unblocked, but their users still cannot access them one week out of the month.

To solve this kind of problem, not only do Western governments and international institutions need to create new metrics for tracking Internet censorship, they also need to go beyond the usual panacea offered against Internet censorship, like circumvention tools that allow access to banned content. The problem with DDoS is that even users in countries that do not block the Internet would not be able to access sites that are under attack; circumvention tools don't work in those situations. It's no longer the case of brutal Soviet agents jamming Radio Free Europe; it's the case of mostly unknown individuals—perhaps on the Kremlin's payroll, perhaps not—erecting roadblocks around the building from which the new Radio Free Europe is supposed to broadcast. Antijamming equipment is not going to help if nobody can actually get in and produce the broadcasts.

Tearing Down the Wrong Walls

Those of us in the West who care about defending online freedom of expression can no longer afford to think about censorship based on obsolete models developed during the Cold War. The old model assumed that censorship was expensive and could only be carried out by one party—the government. Today, however, while many kinds of censorship are still expensive (e.g., software like GreenDam), others are cheap and getting cheaper (e.g., DDoS attacks). This allows the governments to deflect the blame—they're not doing the censorship, after all—and

thus also significantly undercounts total censorship in the world. In many cases, governments don't have to do anything at all; plenty of their loyal supporters will be launching DDoS attacks on their own. The democratization of access to launching cyber-attacks has resulted in the democratization of censorship; this is poised to have chilling effects on freedom of expression. As more and more censorship is done by intermediaries (like social networking sites) rather than governments, the way to defend against censorship is to find ways to exert commercial—not just political—pressure on the main actors involved.

It's also becoming clear that authoritarian governments can and will develop sophisticated information strategies that will allow them to sustain economic growth without loosening their grip on the Internet activities of their opponents. We certainly don't want to spend all our energy tearing down some imaginary walls—making sure that all information is accessible—only to discover that censorship is now being outsourced to corporations or those who know how to launch DDoS attacks. This is yet another reason why “virtual walls” and “information curtains” are the wrong metaphors to assist us in conceptualizing the threat to Internet freedom. They invariably lead policymakers to opt for solutions for breaking through the information blockade, which is fine and useful, but only as long as there is still something on the other end of the blockade. Breaking the firewalls to discover that the content one seeks has been deleted by a zealous intermediary or taken down through a cyber-attack is going to be disappointing.

There are plenty of things to be done to protect against this new, more aggressive kind of censorship. One is to search for ways to provide mirrors of websites that are under DDoS attacks or to train their administrators, many of whom are self-taught and may not be managing the crisis properly, to do so. Another is to find ways to disrupt, mute, or even intentionally pollute our “social graph,” rendering it useless to those who would like to restrict access to information based on user demographics. We may even want to figure out how everyone online can pretend to be an investment banker seeking to read *Financial Times*! One could also make it harder to hijack and delete various groups from

Facebook and other social networking sites. Or one could design a way to profit from methods like “crowdsourcing” in fighting, not just facilitating, Internet censorship; surely if a group of government royalists troll the Web to find new censorship targets, another group could also be searching for websites in need of extra protection?

Western policymakers have a long list of options to choose from, and all of them should be carefully considered not just on their own terms, but also in terms of the negative unintended consequences—often, outside of the geographic region where they are applied—that each of them would inevitably generate. Of course, it's essential to continue funding various tools to access banned websites, since blocking users from visiting certain URLs is still the dominant method of Internet control. But policymakers should not lose sight of new and potentially more dangerous threats to freedom of expression on the Internet. It's important to stay vigilant and be constantly on the lookout for new, yet invisible barriers; fighting the older ones, especially those that are already crumbling anyway, is a rather poor foundation for effective policy. Otherwise, cases like Russia, which has little formal Internet filtering but plenty of other methods of flexing the government's muscles online, will continue puzzling Western observers.

The main thing to keep in mind, though, is that different contexts give rise to different problems and are thus in need of custom-made solutions and strategies. Clinging to Internet-centrism—that pernicious tendency to place Internet technologies before the environment in which they operate—gives policymakers a false sense of comfort, a false hope that by designing a one-size-fits-all technology that destroys whatever firewall it sees, they will also solve the problem of Internet control. The last decade, characterized, if anything, by a massive increase both in the amount and in the sophistication of control, suggests that authoritarian regimes have proved highly creative at suppressing dissent through means that are not necessarily technological. As such, most of the firewalls to be destroyed are social and political rather than technological in nature.

The problem is that technologists who have been designing tools to break technological rather than political firewalls—and often have

been doing it with the financial support of Western governments and foundations—are the ones who control the public conversation. It's in their direct interest to overstate the effectiveness of their own tools and downplay the presence of other nontechnological threats to the freedom of expression. In doing this, they mislead policymakers, who then make poor decisions about the allocation of resources to fight Internet control. Shiyu Zhou, the founder of a Falung Gong technology group that designs and distributes software to access sites banned by the Chinese government, says that "the entire battle over the Internet has boiled down to a battle over resources" and that "for every dollar we [America] spend, China has to spend a hundred, maybe hundreds of dollars" in an interview to the *New York Times* as part of an argument that more funding should be allocated to promote such tools in Iran. This is at best misleading and at worst disingenuous, a throwback to the Cold War debates about closing the missile gap, but this time by overspending the enemy on digital weapons.

This kind of argument only perpetuates myths like "dictator's dilemma" and suggests that authoritarian governments are more vulnerable to the threat of technology than they really are. But even if such sly manipulation of public opinion can be overcome, one still has to remember that no solutions to the censorship problem can be designed in isolation from the other two problems—surveillance and propaganda. The decentralized nature of the Internet makes it relatively easy to set up an infinite number of copies for every byte of information shared over the Web. This ability does not come free, however, even if the financial costs are marginal, for it also allows the creation of new, faster, and often more legitimate publishing outlets that can make government propaganda more believable. Moreover, it opens up opportunities for tracking how information spreads online, enabling the authorities to learn more about those who spread it. Information wants to be free, but so do those exchanging it.

chapter five

Hugo Chavez Would Like to Welcome You to the Spinternet



For years Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez was the world's least likely person to join Twitter. Brevity is not exactly one of his virtues: In the last ten years, Chavez spent more than 1,500 hours denouncing capitalism on *Alo Presidente*, his own TV show. In a broadcast that aired in March 2010, the self-proclaimed leader of the Bolivarian Revolution even attacked the Internet as "a battle trench" that was bringing "a current of conspiracy"; anyone who used "Twitter, the Internet [and] text messaging" to criticize his regime was engaging in "terrorism." Chavez had plenty of reasons to worry about the Internet. A jailed judge had started using Twitter to keep in touch with her followers from prison, while the director of an opposition TV station used it to denounce a conspiracy to oust him. Chavez's outburst was more than a rhetorical flourish. It seems that, much like his American detractors, he was also under the impression that Twitter was the driving force behind the protests in Iran.

As the Venezuelan opposition started using Twitter to mobilize its supporters, Chavez changed his mind. In late April 2010, Diosdado Cabello, the head of Venezuela's communications watchdog and an aide

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