



Does the internet promote greater democracy and freedom? Take heed, Bersih, Pakatan Rakyat, and your supporters

Is it true that the internet offers freedom of information, empowers people, and promotes greater democracy? Browse to any Malaysian anti-government websites, and there are bound to have postings about how some people have stopped depending on traditional newspapers and TV for their news and information. People have lost their confidence on these mass media outlets which they now claim spew out nothing but government propaganda, misinformation, and even outright lies. Instead, these people now depend on internet sources such as blogs, forums, and “independent” news portal for the truth.

It is widely believed that “liberation by knowledge” coming from the internet poses a grave danger to authoritarian governments, who unlike in the past prior to the internet, cannot censor, control, and manipulate the information on the web.

“Like the underground [samizdat](#)...the web has allowed free speech to avoid the reach of the most authoritarian regime,” says [Lee Bollinger](#) of the Columbia University.

“Bloggers are a form of 21st century dissent,” so says [Alec Ross](#), the senior adviser to [Hilary Clinton](#).

Perhaps the most notable use of the internet in government dissent is the [Green](#)

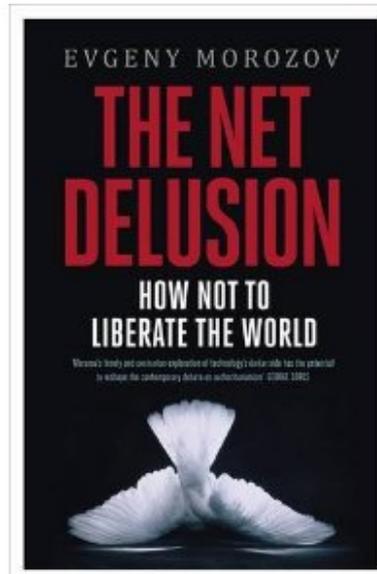
[Movement in Iran in 2009](#). In June 2009, the people of Iran, mostly youths, went to the streets in protest of the fraudulent national election results. It is claimed that they used Tweeter to send out anti-government messages and to organize street rallies against the government.



The short-lived Green Movement protests in Iran in June 2009, protesting against fraudulent national election results by using, among others, Twitter (photo from smallactsofresistance.com)

So, should governments fear the internet? Can “liberation by knowledge” and “people power” through Facebook and Twitter topple even the most authoritarian governments?

[Evgeny Morozov](#), book author of [“The Net Delusions: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom”](#) (also known as “The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World”), gives a resounding answer: “No”.



"The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World" by Evgeny Morozov (photo from amazon.com)

Morozov argues that it is a common misconception that the internet promotes greater democracy and freedom. Instead, the internet works both ways: it can promote as well as crush democracy and freedom. It is naïve to believe that the internet is only for dissidents to organize rebellion and to obtain unbiased information.

The internet can be used to strengthen the authoritarian government and to undermine the opposition. The authoritarian government can take advantage of the decentralized information flow in the internet to misinform the people. The government can send out false information, pictures, or videos to undermine the people's stance with the opposition.

The Iranian government during the height of the Green Movement protests in 2009, for example, put up fake videos where the portrait of [Ayatollah Khomeini](#) was burned. This act of burning was hoped to erode the people's support of Green Movement since the late Ayatollah Khomeini remains a widely respected figure in Iran.

Facebook and Twitter encourages "couch

dissidents” and premature and impulsive street protests



Are Facebook and Twitter really that effective against authoritarian governments? (photo from tevisverrett.com)

Morozov doubts that the use of Twitter amplifies government dissension. Although much has been purported about the use of Twitter during the Iranian government protests, the facts do not support their claims. There is no evidence that Twitter was effective in organizing any protest in Iran. Twitter is not even popular in Iran, where only 0.027% of the Iranian population have a Twitter account. So, where did the Twitter postings all come from during the Iranian protests in 2009? Most of them came from *outside Iran*. Messages of government dissent by the Green Movement supporters were mostly from Westerners tweeting to and enforcing one another.

That the internet can lead to the collapse of governments is also a myth. The fall of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union are often used as examples where their regimes collapsed when the people became enlightened and empowered through greater exposure to “subversive” information. Political analyses have shown that these regimes collapsed because of weak leaders and their reluctance to crackdown on protests (unlike their predecessors), weak economies, and political instabilities. “People power” was only one of the reasons but certainly not the sole or a major reason of the regime collapse.

Social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter may appear to be powerful tools against authoritarian governments. But the problem with these social

networking tools is that they make it easy to become a “couch dissident”. These social networking tools make it easy to join a group. A group can collect many members, or in Facebook terminology, friends, but this number of friends (even in the hundreds or thousands) is not a measure of how passionate or determined the group members are in fighting for the group’s cause.

Studies have shown that the majority of people who join social networking groups only do so to put up their respective façade. They join groups more for self-promotion, narcissism, and to seek attention. Social psychologists have long known that it does not take much effort to make a group of people feel they have a common identity. However, it is much harder to make this group of people act in the interests of the group or to make individual sacrifices. In short, social networks like Facebook and Twitter can give a group of dissidents a false sense of security and hope, overestimating the group’s actual strength and member commitment.

Successful revolutions, Morozov says, require centralized command, committed leaders, strict discipline, absolute dedication, and a strong relationship based on trust. The internet, with its decentralized organization and easy and non-committal membership, makes revolutions harder and less effective.

[Angela Davis](#), a political activist for civil rights in the U.S. during 1960s to 80s, ought to know best. She has been deeply active in fighting for social justice in the U.S., and she even briefly appeared on the FBI’s most-wanted list in 1970. Because of her militant activities, [Ronald Reagan](#), the then Governor of California, warned that she should never be allowed to teach in state-sponsored universities.



Angela Davis, political and social activist in the US, thinks the Internet

creates impulsive street protests
(photo from 1.bp.blogspot.com)

With such an experience on fighting against authorities, we would think Angela Davis, of all people, would be most supportive of street demonstrations against governments. Instead, this is what she says: “Mobilization has displaced organization, so that today, when we think about organizing movements, we think about bringing masses of people into the streets.”

“It’s difficult to encourage people to think about protracted struggles,” she adds, “protracted movements that require very careful organizing interventions that don’t always depend on our capacity to mobilize demonstrations...Just because you can mobilize a hundred million people on Twitter does not mean you should.”

“The internet is an invaluable tool,” Angela Davis concedes, “but it may also encourage instantaneous movements modeled after fast food delivery.”

Street protests, Morozov argues, is usually the *last stage* of protest movements in both democratic and autocratic countries. Doing street protests too early only makes it harder to accomplish a more strategic objective later on.

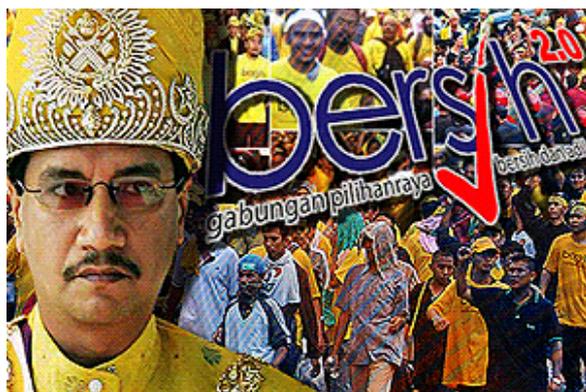


Bersih 2.0 street protests in Kuala Lumpur on July 9, 2009 (photo from static.sglinks.com)

Consequently, I wonder if Bersih have played their “street protest card” too early. At a time when the Election Commission and even the King were listening to their demands, Bersih may have made a serious mistake in going ahead with the street rally. Instead of fortifying their demands, their street protest may have actually weakened their struggle, making it even more difficult to organize another street

rally (*i.e.*, Bersih 3.0) should they need it in the future.

Bersih can certainly discount any support from the royalty establishment from now on in their fight against the government because they have - one might say - deceived the King in telling that they would indeed [cancel the street rally](#). Bersih may have made a serious tactical error in making the royal establishment their unnecessary opponent.



Bersih have made Malaysia's royal establishment their unnecessary opponent (photo from 3.bp.blogspot.com)

No internet censorship if you want to undermine government dissensions

According to Morozov, the support and preservation any authoritarian government would depend on three pillars, or so-called “Trinity of Authoritarianism”, which are propaganda, censorship, and surveillance. It is a myth that the internet has defeated or even restrained any of these three pillars. The internet has only changed how these three pillars operate in tandem with one another today.



The internet filtering technology

used by Amazon and Google can be used to effectively censor the internet based on the users' browsing history and online activities (photo from latimesblogs.latimes.com)

It is a myth that it is difficult to censor information from the net. Websites such as Amazon, Google, and Facebook depend on keyword-based filtering to recommend websites or suggest books or friends based on your web browsing history. But instead of website, friend, or book recommendations, the government can use the same technology of keyword-based filtering to prohibit certain websites based on your web browsing history. Consequently, a person who has a browsing history of many political site visitations may be barred from visiting a Wikipedia page on human rights violations, whereas another person who only visits to entertainment sites would be allowed to visit the same Wikipedia page. This kind of keyword-based filtering to censor the internet has already been successfully practiced in some countries such as China, United Arab Emirates, and Russia.

Another way to censor certain information from the internet is by *crowdsourcing*. Instead of having many people on the government payroll to troll the internet for sensitive or subversive information, the government depend on government supporters to give or submit websites that should be censored. Imagine a website hosted by the government which receives online submissions by the people on controversial websites that should be banned. Inconceivable? Saudi Arabia and Thailand are already practising it! China, however, are one step ahead because the Chinese government additionally rewards the faithful for their online contributions through monetary means.

Evgeny Morozov exposes more astonishing revelations in his book. Government censorship is bad, right? And if people were somehow given access to uncensored information, people would see through the government propaganda, half-truths, and lies, leading to greater awareness of the real and important issues, right? In other words, knowledge would lead to the emancipation of people, right? Morozov says, "Think again."

Consider East Germany before 1990. Nationwide censorship in East Germany was both expensive and impractical. Consequently, censorship was patchy: heavily

enforced in some parts of East Germany and some weakly to almost none enforced in others, in particular in areas near to the border to West Germany. This meant that East Germans living near to the border enjoyed greater access to uncensored information and news coming from West Germany, whereas East Germans living in heavily censored areas had to live with East German propaganda and filtered information.

Conventional wisdom would have us believe that the East Germans living near the border (with access to uncensored information) would be more empowered and be more rebellious against the government than the corresponding people living in heavily censored areas. In reality, the contrary occurred. It was in the heavily censored areas where the greatest national social unrest and political interest occurred. What happened? Entertainment was what happened. Greater exposure to uncensored information from the West Germany have distracted East Germans living near the border from politics.

This is a powerful lesson to all authoritarian governments - that the drive or motivation for entertainment is greater than the drive for more information. More entertainment access actually dampens people interests in politics; hence, lowering dissent. The death of [Michael Jackson](#) in June 25, 2009, for example, had more tweets than the Green Movement protests in Iran. Furthermore, even though tools like [Psiphon](#) was made available to countries to bypass the countries' heavy internet censorship, it is distressing to learn that these tools were used more by the people to access banned porn sites.



Entertainment and consumerism can distract people from politics -- a strategy that can be exploited by authoritarian governments (photo from sunway.com.my/pyramid)

It is not hard to imagine that if an authoritarian government wants a more docile people and to distract them from taking part in government dissension, the government has to work on a strategy that allows more access to entertainment (*e.g.*, think better and more entertainment channels on Astro or cable TV), encourage more consumerism, and impose a very limited (not more) internet censorship so that porn, gambling, and illegal file-sharing sites remain accessible. When people are too engrossed in entertainment and consumerism, they would have too little time to even think about politics, let alone be involve in politics. Job done.

Internet makes surveillance easier and more effective

The internet may make online networking and communications much easier than before, but it has also made surveillance easier especially in social networking sites. The more people flock together to connect, the easier to do surveillance. Snooping via online has become easier, cheaper, faster, more efficient, and more comprehensive than the old-fashioned way of 24/7 stake-outs and hiding microphones or cameras in a person's apartment.

List of friends in Facebook, for example, is visible to everyone to see. Through a person's Facebook profile and online activities, authorities can determine like-minded people and gradually build up a network of conspirators who are against the government. One study in 2010 done by Eurecom and Vienna University of Technology at California, for example, had a success rate of 42% in identifying the identities of persons who anonymously participated in social networking sites.

[Face-recognition technology](#) is increasingly more accurate. Used originally for identifying terrorists, this technology can be used for surveillance and to identify people who put up photos of themselves or with their friends on the internet. Authorities, for example, can use the face-recognition software to identify people who had attended street protests or who were at anti-government rallies. Your online activity and photos of yourself in Facebook, blogs, and other web sites can be used to gradually build up a your profile: your habits, your friends, your ideas, and your political stance. We have unwittingly handed over increasingly more of our private details to the internet which could be used to identify us and to build up our profiles.



Why bother? You may photoshop your face but the internet makes it easier (not harder) to determine your real identity for prosecution and harassment, if needed. And if you brought your mobile phone, the GPS coordinates your phone emits can be used to confirm your attendance in illegal activities. (photo from nkkhoo.com)

Even Google now has an [online image search](#) whereby you can upload a photo and Google would return similar photos to that you have uploaded. It is not difficult to imagine that one day a photo of a suspected dissident be uploaded to Google and Google would return other photos of the dissident in compromising situations which could be used against the dissident as well reveal the identities of other conspirators.

Additionally, two Swedish firms developed a smartphone app called [Recognizer](#) that could query the internet based on a photo taken from the smartphone and the app return what is known about the person in the photo. Although this app was intended more for entertainment purpose, it would not be hard to imagine a more evasive and menacing use of this kind of technology in the hands of an authoritarian government.



Bersih 2.0 supporters in Portland, U.S.A. Face recognition technology can be used to determine their real identities. In turn, their family members and relatives back home can be harassed by tax inspections and by other means (such as subtle revoking of scholarships or loans and job loss or demotion). (photo from financetwitter.com)



Bersih 2.0 supporters in Paris, France. As before, face recognition technology can be used (as well as through their online activities on social networking sites) to determine their real identities for subtle forms of harassment. (photo from financetwitter.com)

Even mobile phones can be used by an authoritarian government, either by

jamming phone signals that could disrupt communications between street protesters or by helping to locate the position of dissidents. The latter could be used as proof of a person's involvement in a street protest, for instance.

As the internet gains increasingly more importance in areas of work, social, economics, and politics, more governments in the world feel a need to regulate the internet. The military and law enforcement agencies are among others that are pushing hard for internet control. The Obama administration, for example, are lobbying for more access to internet records without a court order.

One reason for internet regulation and control is the internet provides user anonymity. This may soon change with increasingly more governments (such as Australia, China, and some European governments) are pushing for a reengineer of the internet so that the actual identity of web users are fully known. One possible change is users must pass a biometric scanner prior to using the internet, akin to logging in before accessing secure websites. The U.S. government also wants registration of online bloggers and activists.

Countries like Turkey, Iran, and Russia have pushed for their own national email and web search services. Recently, the [Malaysian government attempted to push for an email address for every Malaysian citizen](#). At that time, many people thought this idea by the Malaysian government as quaint, without suspecting that there are several side benefits of establishing your own national email and web search services. [Some side benefits include a better way to snoop on dissidents, censor and control information flow, and disrupt online dissensions](#).

Internet makes it easier to spread propaganda and lies

Government propaganda and misinformation can also be spread on the internet easily through veiled government-run blogs and websites. There is ample of evidence that internet freedom has actually made it harder, not easier, to distinguish fact from fiction because the evidence and news presented are often not examined scientifically or rationally. A good example is 9/11 conspiracy theories and Obama's missing birth certificate.

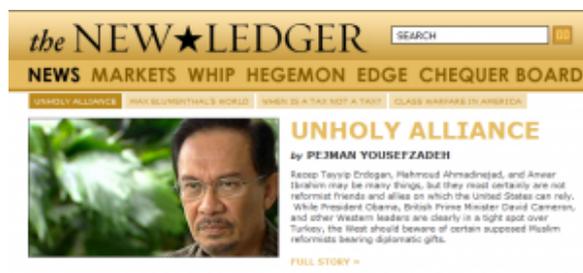
The internet is not only the playground for government dissidents. A government-

funded team of online commentators can be hired to participate in forums to help in guiding the conversation, defending the government, defusing anti-government feelings, and in helping to spread government propaganda. Likewise, a government-funded team of bloggers can do likewise in blogs.

China's so-called [Fifty Cent Party](#) and Nigeria's Anti-Bloggers Fund are some examples of government-funded online army to engage online battles with anti-government opponents. Similarly, the Egyptian government, taking cue from the Green Movement, created fifty Facebook groups to support the successor to the ousted and hated [Hosni Mubarak](#). And who did these fifty groups support for Hosni's successor? His son, [Gamal Mubarak](#).

In Russia, two very talented young persons, Konstantin Rykov and Maria Sergeyeva, have been enlisted to promote pro-government sentiments and propaganda through social network channels and online entertainment.

Lastly, the [Malaysian government may also been involved in this "guns-for-hire" activity](#), having recently been accused of hiring a US-based blog site, [The New Ledger](#), and other associated blogs to defame the opposition parties.

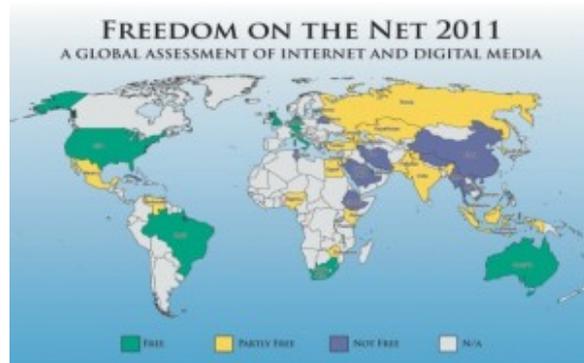


The Malaysian government have been accused of hiring New Ledger, a U.S. blogsite, to defame opposition parties (photo from 3.bp.blogspot.com)

Online battles against anti-government websites

A more offensive approach against online dissension is the sabotage of websites.

The [Jewish Internet Defensive Force \(JIDF\)](#), for example, infiltrated an anti-Israel website by becoming one of website administrators. Upon successful infiltration, the opposition website was then taken down, backups destroyed, and list of members deleted. Anti-government websites can also be attacked by launching [DDoS \(Distributed-Denial-of-Service\)](#) which would overwhelm the target websites with endless online requests. Such DDoS attacks have been carried out by the Vietnamese government on a website that protested the opening of a new bauxite mine in Vietnam. The aforementioned website was taken offline and has since failed to find a site willing to host the website due to frequent DDoS attacks.



Internet freedom for various countries (photo from freedomhouse.org)

Internet accentuates differences between groups of people

The internet, when first introduced, was believed to promote greater freedom and democracy through open and free flow of information, ideas, and beliefs; thus, creating a more global community. However, Evgeny Morozov argues, that this too is a myth. Instead, the internet accentuates differences between groups of people. This is because people seek like-minded people on the internet, people who share similar beliefs, ideas, and perspective. Consequently, we can see groups of neo-Nazis, youth gangs, and pedophiles on the internet. So, instead of bringing people together, the internet causes deeper divisions between various groups of people.

So, although Bersih may have drawn like-minded people into supporting their

cause, the government may likewise use the internet to draw in their own supporters, creating a sharp and deep division between both camps: a dangerous and potential recipe for violence.

Evgeny Morozov argues that even if the internet successfully topples a government, this does not necessarily mean that democracy would follow. Countries like Afghanistan and Iraq have failed to see any signs of greater democracy or freedom after US-led invasion even after a few years. These two countries did not have the necessary fundamentals to build a democratic society. It isn't just a case of people empowerment through greater exposure to knowledge that creates a democratic and freer country. A nascent democratic country arises from a mixture of cultural, economic, social, and political readiness to accept democracy.

Consequently, it is not hard to imagine that if July 9, 2011 street rally by Bersih had been successful to draw a million people into the city and to topple the government, what would follow would not be a more democratic and freer Malaysia. Instead, anarchy and ethnic strife would most probably follow as supporters of the now ousted government take violence to the streets in retribution and protest. In other words, who is to say which side the country's so-called "silent majority" would take if they ever decided to react?

Conclusion

Once in a while comes a book like "The Net Delusions: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom" that slaps you awake from your blissful ignorance and delusion. This book is an extremely readable and important book. It turns your belief about the internet inside out and makes you more aware about the strengths, weaknesses, and dangers about the internet.

Far from promoting greater democracy and freedom, the internet can stifle dissent, amplify inequalities between groups of people, undermine democracy, promote mob mentality, erode privacy, and make us less, not more, informed. You have been warned.



Evgeny Morozov, book author of "The Net Delusions" (photo from evgenymorozov.com)