Malaysian social media regulation? Welcome to the dark side of social media

We thought the social media such as Facebook are a boon to finding out only the truth. We believe this because information flows unrestricted and uncensored from an open, diverse, and hyper-connected network of friends, friends of friends, and freedom fighters in the social media world. There are no gatekeepers here. No one decides which information goes forward and which does not. Information flows to you quickly and unbridled from censors and manipulation from an authoritarian and paranoid regime. But think about it: why should the unbridled social media disseminate only the good and the truth?

The freedom we have on the social media is the same freedom bestowed on those driven by personal and political agendas to spread their misinformation and propaganda. Information that goes viral are those that provoke anger and shock, so what better way to create viral messages than to spread hate?

Consider the recent Lowyat incident that begun as a run-of-the-mill mobile phone theft but that soon mutated into a racial fight, encouraged by the spread of misinformation on the social media and blogs. Or consider the “social media experiment” by CAGM (Citizens for Accountable Governance Malaysia) who deliberately spread misinformation about our Prime Minister to bring home the point that our media thrive on reporting sensational news.

Dear naïve Malaysians, welcome to the dark side of social media.

Social media, in particular Facebook, help to polarize people and encourage herd
mentality. We are naive to think the use of Facebook will promote national unity. Facebook actually accentuates differences between groups of people. Facebook’s collaborative filter helps us to find like-minded people: those who share our beliefs, ideas, and perspectives. When everyone in our circle of friends think alike, is there room for a greater understanding of opinions and perspectives that are different from ours? Facebook’s news algorithm further selects news that matches our interests and beliefs. To have an open and effective discussion and learning experience, we need to have a diversity of opinions and point of views. Instead, Facebook encourages herd mentality. Facebook validates and entrenches our existing stance and opinions.

![Diagram](image)

Does Facebook encourage group polarization? The social media “filter bubble” technology filters and chooses news and information that matches our interests and opinions. We further choose to read articles that matches our opinions and views, so at the end, our views are not challenged but entrenched (from Bakshy et al., 2015).

Facebook is our “echo chamber” where we only hear, see, and click on what we want to hear, see, and click. On social media, we insulate ourselves from news and views that are different from ours.

Furthermore, the 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center found that social media stifle debate. They found that social media users were less willing to discuss the Snowden-NSA controversy in social media than they were in person. 86% of Americans reported that they were willing to debate this issue in person, but yet only 42% of those who use Facebook or Twitter were willing to debate such issues on social media. Moreover, the survey also found that people were
more willing to share their views on social media only if they thought their audience agreed with them. Likewise, a 2013 study by Carnegie Mellon University found that people tend to self-censor more their social media posts or comments if the topic of discussion is highly specific or if the audience are less defined. People self-censor more, out of fear of offending others, instigating an argument, disagreeing with others, or being criticized by others. Facebook can promote racism, as reported by a 2013 study by two US psychologists. They observed that prolific Facebook users were more susceptible than by casual users to negatively racial postings on Facebook.

Prof. Susan Greenfield, who is also a member of the British upper house, is a vocal critic of social media. Social media, she explains, promote narcissism and reduce empathy and self-identity, especially among the youths. Words are only 10% of the social cues in communication, so connecting with others via social media deprives people of the other vital social cues. Consequently, Prof. Greenfield explains, social media make it easier to insult others without noticing the repercussions the insults have on the victims. A recent 2014 study in the US revealed that when preteens were not allowed to use any screen-based media and communication tools for only five days, their interpersonal skills improved.

Prof. Susan Greenfield is a vocal critic of social media which she explains encourage narcissism and reduce empathy and self-identity. The social media also make it easier to insult others (from telegraph.co.uk).

The social media have a very dark side. Far from being some utopian tool of truth, democracy, and social justice, the social media can also be a tool of
misinformation and hidden agendas, a playground for malicious attempts to divert and encourage people to believe and behave in a certain given way. Social media can stifle, not promote, debate, and they amplify differences between groups of people. Social media discourage tolerance and understanding of people who have different beliefs and opinions from ours.

Racism is rife in Malaysia, including in public universities. We are naive to think social media will reduce racism. It might instead promote it (from www.lukeyishandsome.com)

References

Digital Sabbath: Distraction addiction to the Internet, social media, and our digital devices

This article first appeared in the New Sunday Times newspaper (Feb 16, 2014). Here is my full, unedited article.

Recently from Jan. 25 to Feb. 3, 2014, I underwent a self-imposed Digital Sabbath. For ten days, I stayed offline. I was curious to see how unplugging from the Internet, social media, and my mobile digital devices would affect me.

In the World Unplugged study in 2010, 1,000 university students from ten countries were asked to stay offline for 24 hours. For some of these students, staying offline became unbearable. They reported a motley of withdrawal symptoms which included anxiety, depression, confusion, and loneliness. Some
even reported **phantom cellphone vibrations** where they mistakenly thought that their phones were vibrating. The withdrawal symptoms were so bad that more than half the study’s participants failed to complete the study.

Deep entanglement with our devices: Unplugging even for a single day can become a stressful experience (photo from brightlightsearch.blogspot.com).

Studies such as from World Unplugged underscore how deeply and intricately information technology has become entangled with our daily lives.

That we are so entangled with technology is nothing new or revolutionary, writes Alex Soojung-Kim Pang in his book *“The Distraction Addiction”*. Throughout history, humans have been inseparable from technology. Technology innovations have helped shape and define us humans. Our relationship with computers, however, is unique, different from what we have with other technologies. We tend to become deeply attached to our computers, treating them as extensions of our minds. As computers become increasingly responsive, interactive, adaptive, and in some cases, more social, their capacity to affect us would increase – and our attachment and reliance on them would further deepen.
But the problem with information technology, according to Soojung-Kim Pang, is it is poorly designed and thoughtlessly used. Computers today are faster, but are we writing and reading faster or remembering more today? Or has our workload increased instead?

Technology innovations ironically do not always reduce our workload, as first observed by English economist William Stanley Jevons in 1865 and then by historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan from the University of Pennsylvania in 1983. Innovations such as the Internet and mobile digital devices, for instance, have increased the amount of alerts and messages that are sent and received and that must be acted upon. So, while these technologies have made our work easier, faster, and more efficient, they have also increased our workload and created additional work — precisely because our work have been improved. Thanks to these technologies, the standard by which our work should now be accomplished has also been raised. For instance, we are now expected to be accessible at all times.

With increased workload and work demands, our stress levels would increase in tandem. In 2008, writer Linda Stone observed that whenever people (including herself) checked their emails, people would unconsciously hold their breath. Stone called this condition “email apnea”, and this condition is caused by anxiety when people read their emails, dreading news about deadlines, problems,
concerns, or whatever fires that need to be put out. A [2012 study by Mark and his colleagues] further found that employees who frequently checked their emails and who received more emails experienced higher stress than those who checked their emails less and who received less emails.

The Internet, social media, and mobile digital devices have changed the way and speed we communicate with one another. [Catherine Steiner-Adair], in her book “The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age”, reveals that while such technologies help us connect to more people than ever, these technologies also paradoxically disconnect us from them. When it comes to relationships, such technologies favor quantity over quality, breadth over depth, and superficiality over intimacy. Increased used of digital devices have caused us to spend more time on these devices and less time relating on a more meaningful way with our family and friends.

“The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age” by Catherine Steiner-Adair
Information technology paradox: Connected to others but yet disconnected from them (including those beside you) (photo from techland.time.com).

Because of information technology, we have become more distracted, impulsive, and impatient. Our attention span has declined, and we multitask more. And our reading comprehension has also declined. As pointed out by Nicholas Carr in his book “The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains”, frequent reading off a computer screen encourages shallow reading where we “scan” sentences: reading quickly but superficially and without reflecting deeply on what have been read.

Our children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the Internet and digital media because our brains take an astonishingly long time to mature. Our prefrontal cortex, for instance, takes 25 years to fully develop. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for executive and cognitive functions that include functions for regulating behavior, distinguishing between right and wrong, and self-control. That the prefrontal cortex is responsible also for self-control is consequential for two reasons. Firstly, numerous studies have revealed that information technologies cause lower self control in children, and secondly, children’s self-control is found to be the greatest predictor of their adulthood success. Research by Walter Mischel in the late 1960s and recently by Terrie Moffitt and his team in 2011 have consistently shown that the more children can delay their gratification (that is, have greater self-control), the more likely these children would be healthy, wealthy, and more intelligent in their adulthood lives.
The landmark study, so-called the “Marshmallow Test”, by Stanford University’s Walter Mischel showed that children who can delay their gratification (i.e., have greater self control) would likely be successful later in their adulthood lives. Self control is the greatest predictor of a child’s success later in life (photo from www.dailyfinance.com).

Consequently, Steiner-Adair urges parents to be more careful in allowing their children access to information technologies. But instead of limiting their children’s exposure, some parents mistakenly increase it by using computers and other mobile devices as surrogates to educate their children. Digital devices like iPads do help in learning, but they are merely tools and cannot replace the role of direct and personal engagement from parents. In 2010, Rebekah Richert and her colleagues at the University of California showed that children appeared not to have learned any new words after watching educational DVDs on vocabulary for six weeks. Instead, children who were directly taught by their parents and without DVD support learned far more.

How children learn best: Information
technology is merely a tool, and it cannot replace the direct and personal engagement from parents.

Information technology has no doubt brought us many benefits. But we need to understand that information technology brings both the good and the bad.

Soojung-Kim Pang encourages “contemplative computing” practice – a blend between science and philosophy – to understand how information technology affects us and how we can create a healthy and more balanced relationship with it. Contemplative computing includes determining our online habits and using social media more mindfully. Even the use of so-called Zenware software such as Freedom and WriteRoom can improve our work productivity by helping to remove distractions that would cause us to multitask.

Soojung-Kim Pang further recommends the regular use of restorative spaces or activities, where we can go or what we can do to think and reflect in peace, and the regular practice of Digital Sabbath where we go completely offline. All these are to help us maintain focus, become less distracted, and have a sense of being away and at the same time a sense of being connected to our life ideals or philosophies, without the interference from information technology.

Alex Soojung-Kim Pang takes a break too from the
Meditating helps too. Far from just some quaint activity done by Buddhist monks, a series of scientific studies particularly by Richard Davidson and Antoine Lutz from University of Wisconsin-Madison have shown that people who meditate often are less distracted, have longer attention span, and have greater memory. And increasingly more people are meditating too, as revealed by Kate Pickert in her article “The Art of Mindfulness” in the Time magazine (Feb. 3, 2014). She writes about the MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) classes. Since its inception in 1979, MBSR has more than 1,000 class instructors in over 30 countries. MBSR teaches people mindfulness techniques that include meditation to cope with the online cacophony and to calm their busy minds.

Meditating has been scientifically shown to improve concentration, attention span, and memory (photo from www.theepochtimes.com).
Steiner-Adair concludes her book by reminding parents to develop a family philosophy about how information technology would be used, so its usage reflects and supports the family values. The incontrovertible truth, Steiner-Adair maintains, is children need their parents’ time and their direct and personal engagement.

At the end, I came out from my Digital Sabbath more mindful. I have become more self-controlled in using the Internet while I am at work. I have terminated my cable TV because my family and I seldom watch TV anyway. I have downgraded my BlackBerry plan to a simpler broadband plan, and my BlackBerry has been set so it no longer gives an audible or vibration alert when new emails or messages come in. I would again wear a wristwatch after nearly twenty years lest I be tricked into checking my emails if I were to use my smartphone to tell time. I will check my emails and messages when I need to and not because my BlackBerry tells me to.

During the ten days of my Digital Sabbath, I had received over a hundred emails of which more than two-thirds were either spams or scams and the rest were
legitimate emails – but none of them needed my immediate response. I had missed nothing.

It would be nice to see this instead:
No WiFi zone for people to take a break and connect to others in a more meaningful manner (photo from adsoftheworld.com).

Manipulating the net: How much can we trust what we read on the net?

Evgeny Morozov’s “The Net Delusions: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom” is one of the most important books I have read. Having read it two years ago, I now often treat web news, in particular those coming from social media (e.g.,
Facebook and Twitter), with plenty pinches of salt.

Recently, another important book “Trust Me, I’m Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator” by Ryan Holiday reaffirms my view that the web can be a dark and dangerous place to obtain information.

These two books show that we are naïve. We believe the web is a boon to democracy because it gains us access to more information, more empowerment, and more opportunities for social activism. We believe the web, through its propagation of information, create “shared awareness” such that we not only better understand a situation but also better understand what others are thinking too. Through shared awareness, we believe the web coordinates loose groups of people into collective action to demand change.

“Trust Me, I’m Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator” by Ryan Holiday, Portfolio Hardcover, 2012.

But the truth is the web does not free us from information bias, conflicts, manipulation, and sensationalism. To believe otherwise is not only naïve but also utopian.
We are naïve to think the web reveals the truth. Instead of the truth, we can be subtly manipulated to react in a desired manner (photo from rapgenius.com).

Holiday’s “Trust Me, I’m Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator” is the first book of its kind. It is an exposé of a self-confessed and (partly) reformed media manipulator. Ryan Holiday’s job involves the dark arts of carefully creating, packaging, and feeding false information to the web. He would then sit back as his false information spreads virally to achieve its intended outcome.

Ryan Holiday, self-confessed online media manipulator (photo from
Holiday is the person you would hire to manipulate information on the web for some specific purpose, such as to promote a product brand, to create controversies (when there is initially none), or to target your enemies with fake information or rumor. What is worse is Holiday is not alone. There are many such media manipulators out there and whose identities are unknown even to seasoned Holiday.

So, yes, we the web users are naïve, and we have been subtly duped and exploited many times over.

In his book, Holiday writes that news on the web is not a critical investigation of issues, but engineered to hook, distract, and cause us to react in certain desired manner. With the advent of the web, standards of what constitutes news, how news are vetted for validity, longevity of news, and the tone news are presented have changed for the worse.

We have been taught to believe that written information have validity, but with the advent of web, this belief has been corrupted by media manipulators. Web news are speculations, impulsive, exaggerated, distorted, and misleading.

The result is what Holiday calls as “unreality”, a situation whereby we cannot distinguish truth from fiction, real outcome from what was staged, relevant from trivial. Furthermore, false information in the web do not stay false; they evolve to become accepted as real.

Unreality occurs because of the so-called link economy and the delegation of trust. This is a case when a news or story is linked by multiple sites, and each site assumes the story has been verified by the source from which this story was taken. In other words, trust has been delegated to other parties. Web sites commonly rely on other sites to provide stories, to borrow stories from one another. A site may perhaps add a few commentaries on a story it linked, but essentially, the story is taken in verbatim, often with no or little verification.
About 16 million or 65% of Malaysia’s population are internet users, of which 12 million people use Facebook and nearly half a million use Tweeter. Social media sites are accessed at a rate of about 19.4 million times per hour (photo from humanwebsite.com.my).

Multiple site linkages to a story gives appearance of credibility, akin to multiple citations to a scientific paper. But unlike in science where evidence is verified independently and repeatedly, web articles receive no such cross checks. Instead, in the world wide web, the false can morph into real if the false is disseminated by enough people (or sites). False information are often not taken down quickly and can even persist for years in the web.

Holiday gives several reasons why the web is an easy breeding ground for manipulation. Web sites are driven by traffic and advertisements, which ultimately determines the site’s revenue. Consequently, quality of information is less important, as long as the information triggers traffic or better still, goes viral. The value of information is not determined by its accuracy or helpfulness but by its “spreadability”. If the information is not shared, the information is regarded as useless. Furthermore, the quick turnover of information on the web places enormous pressure on sites to produce news, which leaves little time for research
or verification.

This kind of environment makes it easy for media manipulators to feed false information that have been designed to arouse powerful emotions in people so that the information goes viral. But arousing just any emotion will not do. Holiday cites a research by Berger and Milkman in 2011 who found that of all emotions, anger was found to be the most powerful criterion that causes people to share information. In short, anger – not sadness, depression, or mixed emotions – makes information viral. Similarly, the research by Lang in 1996 found that people were provoked more emotionally, paid more attention, and had better memory recall of negative than neutral video footages.

Furthermore, fake stories are designed to additionally anticipate for user comments. Media manipulators do not want stories that are too safe, too well written, or complete in information because such stories elicit no comments. Fake stories have to be incomplete, incendiary, and even misleading to provoke people to comment. Media manipulators would not only create fake stories, but also create fake comments to supplement the fake stories. Made-up comments from fake users are given to stage a scene of a heated and polarized debate on the fake story. These media manipulators may also send fake emails to reporters or web publishers to give an impression that some trivial issue has turned “hot”.

Errors in news are propagated quickly and widely in the web. But corrections are seldom done and even if done, these corrections are seldom highlighted, noticed, or remembered. Errors remain “sticky” in people’s minds. Holiday cites a research where corrections do not fix errors. Instead, corrections were found to fortify and entrench people’s misconceptions. That corrections amplify misconceptions is surprising. It is as if people regard corrections as a cover up on deception.

A good example of the futility of correcting errors is Malaysia’s opposition street rallies, collectively called as “Blackout 505”, which is so named in response to the perceived blackouts that had occurred in some vote-counting stations. Even though these blackouts were shown later to never have occurred, this misconception still persists, perhaps even amplifying in people’s minds that these blackouts were further evidence of election fraud.
Another serious problem with news from the web, Holiday adds, is some sites practise “interactive journalism”, where, information are published first, then verified later. Such news are updated frequently by relying on others to validate the facts, to send in updates, or to send in additional sources for contact. Interactive journalism does not create finished articles, but create articles that remain work-in-progress, awaiting further input. This kind of journalism encourages misinformation, allegations, rumors, half-truths, shoddy reporting, needless information, and endless projections and predictions. Interactive journalism also encourages sensationalism. If stories are anything but sensational, why would anyone read these so-called interactive news and participate by sending in updates?

The problem with interactive journalism is the information presented at any one time may be inaccurate or even downright wrong. The news may be updated frequently, but people see only a snapshot of the information at a point in time. Even the crowd-sourced and collaborative Wikipedia has been fed with false information by media manipulators, which has led to false information being propagated by other sites as fact. Although the wrong information was later corrected or deleted from Wikipedia, the false information continued to persist in some news sites. If you have not been following the Wikipedia updates or
corrections, you may take these false information at face value and accept them as true.

So, at the end, what hope do we as web users have? Holiday offers little hope or resolutions in his book. Far from freeing people with greater access to information, the web polarizes people, exacerbating differences between groups of people by filtering of information and by helping to present information on what people only want to see. The web, Holiday remarks, is hardly the place for revealing the truth; instead, the web is a place for cultural catharsis, made up of online lynch mobs, attack blogs, smear campaigns, cyberbullying, and trial by comments.

Perhaps it is time, Holiday suggests, that we demand quality of information and not quantity. We cannot expect instant news and yet expect it to be done well. No one owns or controls the information flow on the web, not completely anyway. Media manipulators, Holiday admits, are manipulated too on the web. After years of misusing and exploiting the web, Holiday has become frightened of what the web has become.

Drawn over a century ago, this drawing depicts the manipulation of media, often resulting in increasingly larger lies, deceit, and harm that ultimately goes out of
control. Ryan Holiday sees himself as “the fool who feeds the monster” (photo from Ricardo Galli via Google+)

Holiday’s book uses several examples of media manipulation in the US, but it is not difficult to find similar examples in Malaysia. Government-hired blogs, the mysterious Red Bean Army, and lone operators have been working anonymously in the background to manipulate the web for devious, ulterior purpose.

The mysterious Red Bean Army, opposition-sponsored media manipulators to spread misinformation and intimidation? (photo from mole.my).

The web can indeed be a dark and dangerous place to obtain information.

Sources

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.

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


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)
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 have 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 a 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.
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.

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.
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 that 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](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 is 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)