

The New York Times

January 27, 2011

Revolutionary Arab Geeks

By **ROGER COHEN**

LONDON — Ill-timed books are an interesting subculture. “Dow 36,000” comes to mind. It was written by James Glassman and Kevin Hassett and published in 1999, just as the tech bubble peaked. Now we have Evgeny Morozov’s “The Net Delusion” — sub-title “The Dark Side of Internet Freedom” — hitting stores just as the Facebook-armed youth of Tunisia and Egypt rise to demonstrate the liberating power of social media.

Ooops.

Morozov — born in Belarus, educated in Bulgaria, living in California — is a rumped, bespectacled 26-year-old (“I am embarrassingly young,” he told me) with no driver’s license and an outsized brain. He’s funny and talks very fast, as if the words issuing from him are trying, in vain, to catch up with the thoughts zipping through his head like electrons around an atom.

These thoughts, as gathered in his exhaustive book, go like this: Cyber-utopians, not least Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, have spawned a dangerous illusion by suggesting the world can blog, tweet, Facebook, YouTube and Google its way to democracy and freedom.

In an age where “The best and the brightest are now also the geekiest” — Morozov can turn a sound-byte — the so-called “Google Doctrine” has, in the author’s view, become a seductive trap. The reality, he argues, is that too often the Internet “empowers the strong and disempowers the weak.”

Far from favoring the oppressed, Web 2.0 gives new tools to the oppressor in cracking down on some opponents — “One stolen password now opens data doors that used not to exist” — and lulling others into passivity — “All they want to connect to is potential lovers, pornography and celebrity gossip.” Kremlin ideologues, he notes, have become very adept, sometimes with sexy shows, in forging “digital captives” distracted from politics.

The fact that social media is dominated by U.S. corporations allows repressive governments from Belarus to Beijing to hatch persuasive conspiracy theories conflating, say, Twitter with

American government plots, especially when, as with the Iranian uprising of 2009, there are publicized contacts between U.S. State Department officials and the company.

A big Clinton speech on Internet freedom, like the one she made in January, 2010, may only expose dissident bloggers to added danger by making them appear as the long arm of American subversion — or so Morozov contends. A 69-page bibliography attests to his reading in unearthing arguments against cyber-delusions.

I think Morozov is brilliant and his book is a useful provocation. I also think he's dead wrong.

Sure, the first decade of the 21st century has seen anti-Western authoritarianism hold its ground, and there's no question the people running repressive systems are quick studies who've learned to exploit, or suppress, a revolutionary technology that challenges them. Still, they're swimming against the tide. The freedom to connect is a tool of liberation — and it's powerful.

I am writing this on my return from Tunisia, where Facebook gave young protesters the connective muscle to oust an Arab dictator, and as I watch on YouTube images of brave young Egyptians confronting the clubs and water-cannons of President Hosni Mubarak's goons.

“All they have, all they have,” says one bloodied protester of the brute force he's encountered. Yes, when all you have is a big hammer — and that's what's left in the arsenal of decaying, nepotistic Arab regimes — everything looks like a nail.

The truth is these men — add the 23-year rule of the ousted Tunisian dictator Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali to the reigns of Mubarak and Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya and you have almost a century of despotism — are relics to whom a wired world has given the lie.

Organization, networking, exposure to suppressed ideas and information, the habits of debate and self-empowerment in a culture of humiliation and conspiracy: These are some of the gifts social media is bestowing on overwhelmingly young populations across the Arab world.

Above all, the Internet's impact has been to expose the great delusion that has led Western governments to buttress Arab autocrats: that the only alternative to them was Islamic jihadists. No, the Tunisian revolution was middle-class, un-Islamic and pro-Western. The people in the streets of Cairo are young, connected, non-ideological and pragmatic: They

want a promise that Mubarak won't stand in the presidential election this year or hand power to his son, Gamal, who, by the way, has a nice pad on London's chic Eaton Square.

As the Egyptian Nobel Prize winner Mohamed ElBaradei told my colleagues David Kirkpatrick and Michael Slackman, "I am pretty sure that any freely and fairly elected government in Egypt will be a moderate one, but America is really pushing Egypt and pushing the whole Arab world into radicalization with this inept policy of supporting repression."

Enough already! If Clinton was serious in announcing that a U.S. priority is now to "harness the power of connection technologies and apply them to our diplomatic goals," and if she truly sees the Arab world's foundations "sinking into the sand," the moment is now to back change in Cairo.

And I can't think of better atonement for Morozov's errors than for him to apply his brilliance and Web savvy to the cause of Egyptian and Tunisian democracy.