THE FOLLY OF TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTIONISM: AN INTERVIEW WITH EVGENY MOROZOV

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TO SAVE EVERYTHING, CLICK HERE: THE FOLLY OF TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTIONISM
Evgeny Morozov

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September 9, 2013 — Evgeny Morozov, a former denizen of the technology world, gained notoriety as a skeptic of that world with his 2010 book *The Net Delusion*, in which he argued that technology enthusiasts or "cyber-utopians" had oversold the liberatory potential of the Internet. His latest book, the much-reviewed *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*, continues in this vein, presenting a polemical critique of those who too readily embrace digital technology as a tool for freedom and democracy. This interview, conducted in person on May 18, 2013, in Cambridge, MA, pushes Morozov to clarify a number of the perspectives and analyses he develops in the course of the book.

I | Solutionism and its Discontents

Natasha Dow Schüll (NDS): In your book you write against what you call "technological solutionism"—an endemic ideology that recasts complex social phenomena like politics, public health, education, and law enforcement as "neatly defined problems with definite, computable solutions or as transparent and self- evident processes that can be easily optimized—if only the right algorithms are in place!" How did you come to choose the phrase "technological solutionism" to describe the approach you're criticizing?

EVGENY MOROZOV (EM): The analysis was there all along, but the idea of solutionism didn't occur to me until the very end. I wrote most of the book in Belarus last summer, and when I was flying back to the States, reading about urban planning and architecture on the plane, I stumbled upon this word. I had been using the phrase "silicon mentality" but it didn't have the same zing as "technological solutionism." Solutionism travels very well—you see people taking it up and applying it in their own fields.

NDS: Aren't human beings solutionist, technological creatures by nature? Do you really think it's a historically specific, contemporary phenomenon?

EM: It's a good point—that solutionism is part of our normal problem-solving apparatus. But clearly something has changed. I open the book by talking about the proliferation of sensors anywhere and everywhere, the portability of smart phones, the ubiquity of social networks, et cetera. A new problem-solving infrastructure is here; new types of solutions become possible that weren't possible 15 years ago. The way in which we have redefined things like inefficiency or ambiguity or opacity as problematic has nothing to do with deep ideas about political philosophy (in the case of politics) or criminal justice (in the case of crime) but has to do instead with this wonderful new infrastructure for problemAsolving: Why not introduce it to solve all these problems we can suddenly see? nd so citizens are being asked to do things they previously didn't have to do or didn't have to worry about. So in that sense, I understand the current state of solutionism through the prism of the kind of problemAsolving approaches that overtake governance.

III | Quantified Narratives

NDS: You write in your chapter on the folly of the Quantified Self (QS) movement that "self-trackers gain too much respect for the numbers and forget that other ways of telling the story—and generating action out of it—are possible."

EM: The QS movement essentially reduces everything to a single number and while you may learn how to adjust your behavior to that number, it doesn't necessarily translate into any holistic understanding of the self who is behaving. So in a sense the person becomes a kind of a black box with an input and an output, but the user himself has no idea how the input relates to the output.

NDS: Do numbers always work against self-narration? I was just at a QS summit and there was a well-attended breakout session on self-tracking as self-narration. The defining activity of QS is its Show and Tell events, in which individual self-trackers get on stage and tell a story about what they tracked, what they learned, et cetera. In that case, aren't numbers just an element in a narrative process? I worry that the QSers you quote—mainly from media reports—serve a bit too readily as straw men for your argument. I mean, it's almost too easy to make fun of them as you do! I wonder what you might be missing by ignoring their actual practices.

EM: There's no way I'm going to go spend time with them—I can't stand them!

NDS: Well, I've been spending a lot of time with them lately and I can tell you that by and large they're not converts to the neat, existentially impoverished thinking you resist. They start from the premise that human beings are fallible, inconsistent creatures rather than rational actors, and then they experiment with different ways of living with that fact. For the most part their experiments are deeply reflexive, and very often playful; their aim is not to plug in the numbers and strip life of its imperfections, surprises, and failures. You have no desire to spend time with these people, I grant you that—but don't you think there can be poetry in numbers, and that you might have missed it in your account?

EM: I'm sure if I spent enough time with them I'd have a subtler account—but the goal in the book was not to understand the QS movement.

NDS: I'm not saying that was your goal—but you use QS in your argument, and in a way that risks missing what's actually going on. I don't want to overly ennoble QSers, but I dare say they sounded a lot like the radical self-doubters practicing the kind of "innovation in a different key" that you call for in the final paragraph of your book: "Only through radical self-doubt can solutionism transcend its inherent limitations." They're asking all the same kinds of questions that you are, actually, and they're constantly "auditing" their own algorithms, to use your language.

EM: You're right that maybe it's unfair to judge QS by its manifestos, but given that I'm more interested in the discourse and the *idea* of the Internet, I chose to rely on the manifestos of Quantified Self luminaries as one way to examine that. In those manifestos, I see the narrative imagination dropping out. When I talk about the narrative imagination dropping out, I'm talking about narratives of our relationship with the system—our self-understanding as political subjects. And I'm talking about how numeric, nonsystemic understandings of the self can be co-opted by health care providers or governments or the food industry, who think that posting calories on all their products relieves them of the responsibility of cutting back on sugar, et cetera.

Nest thermostat caters the temperature of your home to your schedule. Flickr / Nest

IV | Left to Our Own Devices

NDS: Let me ask a personal question: judging from online photos, it appears that you recently lost quite a bit of weight. Did you do any self-tracking to accomplish that, or not?

EM: That was my challenge: to try to lose weight without tracking myself. It was my promotional activity for the book! I lost 80 pounds, and I haven't gained that weight back in about six months.

NDS: So if getting in shape was your goal, how did you achieve it?

EM: One aspect was a very radical and strict diet—I stopped eating meat, I don't eat bread, I don't eat cheese, I don't eat pasta, I don't eat sugar. And I do three hours of exercise a day; I row and I run on the elliptical, and I have the equipment in my apartment so I don't have to go anywhere—and I do other things while I'm exercising, like reading newspapers on my iPad or watching movies on a projector.

NDS: Have you ever tracked things like your time use, for productivity purposes? You're a prolific writer and I'm curious if there's any system behind that.

EM: A few years ago I tried using RescueTime [a productivity-tracking software program], which tracks everything I do online, but I never bothered to look at the stats. What *has* helped me is my safe. Do you know about my safe?

NDS: Tell me about your safe.

EM: Well, some people think it's very perverse. I bought a safe on eBay with a timed combination lock that lets me preset when it opens and closes. So I can lock my phone and my Internet cable in there and have no way to get online—unless I open a panel with a screwdriver, and so I also lock all my screwdrivers in the safe as well. And that's how I get work done. I can easily resist on my own—it just takes effort, so what I'm doing is saving cognitive effort: I don't have to say "no" to myself every 30 minutes when I feel like going to check my email. Why should I do that if I can just use this material artifact to prevent those distracting questions from

happening? Why should I have an internal battle with myself?

NDS: Okay, but how does this system not participate in the kind of self-binding logic that underpins a lot of the nudges and apps that you criticize in your book?

EM: I've had the safe for about a year and lately I've been trying to think how it fits with my philosophy. And I think it actually fits—because in a sense the very decision to put something in my safe is an act of … courage, or will, whatever language you want to use.

NDS: But isn't that a perfect example of a technological solution in which the individual is saddled with the burden of problem-solving and attention is deflected away from systemic conditions?

EM: The critique that you could advance in the case of my safe is that instead of tackling the ideological foundation of ubiquitous communication—instead of going and fighting with Google and Facebook and my Internet provider for creating a system where my only option is to use a safe, and getting them to take down Wi-Fi routers everywhere so that we have Wi-Fi-free zones, I actually use the safe and do nothing to change the larger context. So there is a way in which the safe depoliticizes me by privatizing the solution. You could say that building myself a safe is a really neoliberal kind of approach to problem solving—it's like a gated community at the level of my self.

NDS: So, in the end, can you make your safe fit with your philosophy or not?

EM: This is where I think my celebration of imperfection and democracy allows me an escape because I'm using the time I'm saving with my safe to actually write the text with which to criticize solutions like my safe! So that's how I get out of it philosophically.

Natasha Dow Schüll is a cultural anthropologist and associate professor in the Program on Science, Technology, and Society at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is the author of *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (2012) and is currently working on a book about digital self-tracking.