

Media Studies

Politics, the Internet, and Social Media

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Focus Question

How could (should?) 'the internet' change politics?

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Political Consequences

- Nature of participation in democratic process can/has change(d) radically with internet technologies
 - Phone-ins & letters → e-mail, online voting etc
- Web allow news forms of political engagement
 - New types of news coverage
 - New forms of activism
 - New forms of leadership



1. Government Operations

- Daily operations / administration

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1. Government Operations

- License applications, taxes, laws etc

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2. Elections / Campaigning

- Online Campaigning

- BO in 2008:**
- raised \$500m
 - 13m email addr.
 - recruited 2m volunteers
 - org'd 200k offline events

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Vaccari, C. (2010). "Technology as a commodity": The internet in the 2008 United States Presidential election. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 7(4):318-339.

2. Elections / Campaigning

"the intersection between political dynamics and Internet technologies is breeding hybrid organizational structures that blend top-down and bottom-up ideal types, promote the coupling of horizontal and vertical relationships, and in the process enable campaigns to develop message-distribution apparatuses that offer the advantages of both mass scale and personal contact"



Possible problems

- Largely hidden
- Truthful?
- Checks?
- Lawful?



<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/17/inquiry-launched-into-how-uk-parties-target-voters-through-social-media>

2. Elections (voting)

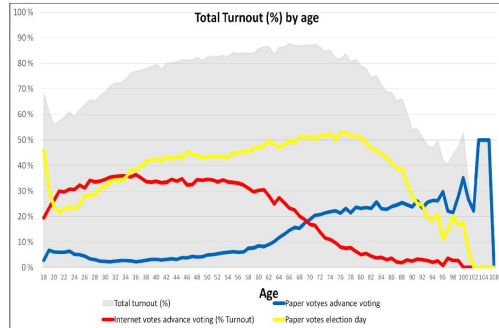


- Voting: pilot schemes in >10 countries since 2000
- **Estonia**
 - 2007 first national parl. elections with "i-voting" (internet)
 - 3.2% of voters used the service
 - 2011 national parl. election
 - 140,846 e-voters (24% of actual voters)
 - 2021 Presidential elections etc etc

<https://e-estonia.com/solutions/e-governance/i-voting/>
<https://www.valimised.ee/en>
<https://www.ndl.org/e-voting-guide/examples/internet-voting-in-estonia>

E-voting: Norway

Data from 12 internet municipalities (250.000 possible voters):



Data from election in 2013

https://www.oas.org/es/sap/deco/seminarios/peru/prd/Henrik_Nore.pdf

3. Political-Social Movements

- **NGOs / campaigning charities**
 - Online recruitment
 - Fundraising
- **Social Movements**
 - Demonstrations etc
 - 'Organisation'

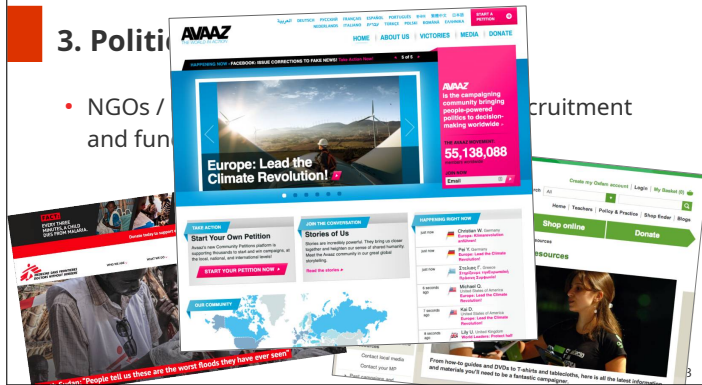
3. Political-Social Movements

- NGOs / campaigning charities – online recruitment and fundraising



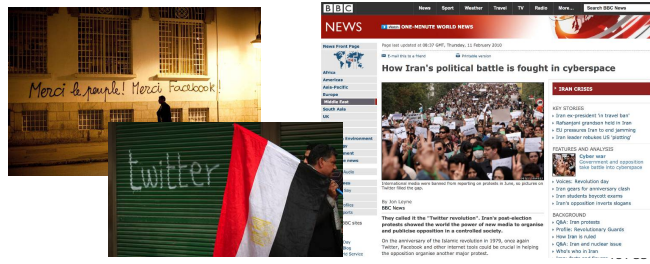
3. Political

- NGOs / and fun recruitment



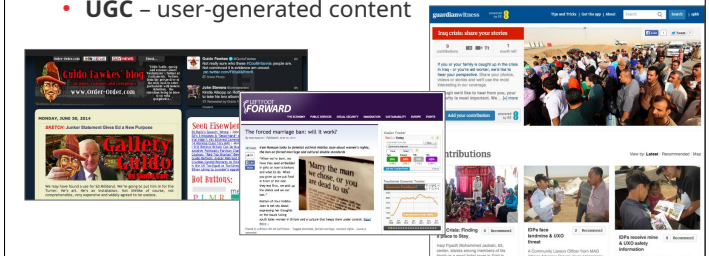
3. Political-Social Movements

- Social media as organisational tool



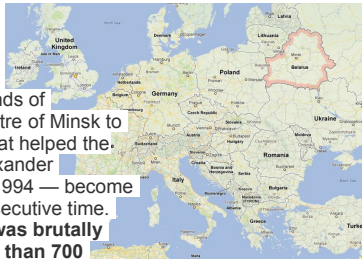
4. Journalism

- Political commentary – “blogosphere”
- UGC – user-generated content



Evgeny Morozov

“Two years ago, tens of thousands of Belarusians gathered in the centre of Minsk to protest against election fraud that helped the country's authoritarian ruler Alexander Lukashenko — in power since 1994 — become the president for the fourth consecutive time. The peaceful demonstration was brutally dispersed by the police. More than 700 Belarusian citizens were detained and served administrative arrests; hundreds of protesters, journalists and even accidental passers-by were beaten up by the police.”



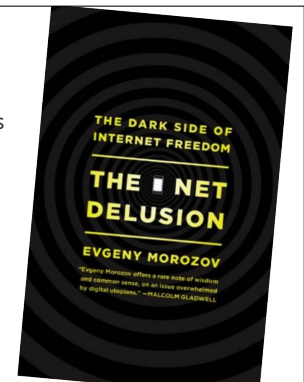
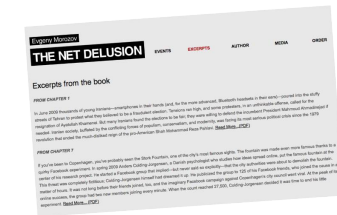
Morozov's Main Points

- Critical approach to 'the Net'
 - The internet CAN enhance democracy
 - Dictators can blog too
 - Maintaining the positive effects of the internet will require effort, POLITICAL effort.



The Net Delusion

- <http://netdelusion.com/excerpts>



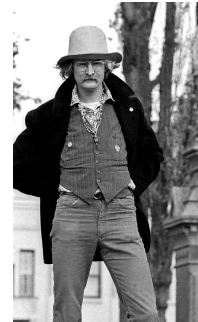
The 'logic' of the net

- Traces this idea back to the 'Californian Ideology': *techno-utopianism*
- More devices and connectivity doesn't necessarily mean more 'liberalism'
- There is nothing inherently democratising about 'the Net'. Promoting democracy is not the same as promoting net access etc.

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All Watched Over By Machines Of Loving Grace

I like to think
(right now, please!)
of a cybernetic forest
filled with pines and electronics
where deer stroll peacefully
past computers
as if they were flowers
with spinning blossoms.

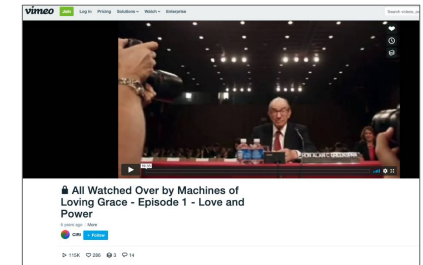


Richard Brautigan 1935-1984

<https://allpoetry.com/All-Watched-Over-By-Machines-Of-Loving-Grace>

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Adam Curtis documentary series



Episode 1

<https://vimeo.com/groups/96331/videos/80799353>

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Outline

- Changes in technology and media use may have influences in a number of different areas...
 - Government Operations
 - Elections
 - Political / Social Movements
 - "Security"
- Is **e-Democracy** the solution?

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To save everything, click here

- Critique of 'solutionism'
- "the technological solutions available for minor problems (the itches that geeks want to scratch) lead us to shallow thinking, and our goals divert from understanding large, complex social problems into writing yet more apps. Worse, we start seeing only problems that can be solved by apps as problems worth solving."



<https://www.zdnet.com/article/to-save-everything-click-here-book-review/>

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The "Spinternet"

- Combines 'spin' + 'internet'
 - "the presentation of information in a particular way; a slant, especially a favourable one"
- **Authoritarian Deliberation**



"Big Brother"

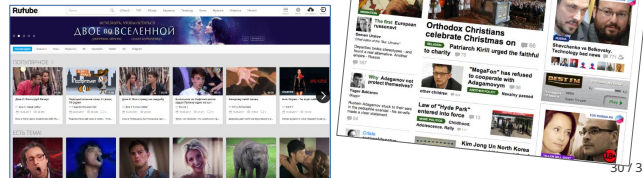
- **Authoritarian Deliberation**
- Net is a great source of 'on-the-ground' information – what Morozov refers to as 'Open-source Intelligence'
 - Dictators need information too
 - Knowledge of local corruption
 - Opportunity to co-opt critics



Scene from film of George Orwell's 1984

Authoritarian adaptation

- **Russia**
 - Provide entertainment
 - distraction



Problems inherent in democracy: e-Democracy

- **Time**
- **Size/scale**
 - Can you assemble everyone at one time?
- **Knowledge**
 - This is limited for the typical citizen
- **Access**
 - Inequality of resources hampers capacity to participate

Problems inherent in democracy: e-Democracy

- In a wired world, problem solved!
- where participation is instantaneous and space irrelevant
- we have Wikipedia!! (information)
- Participation 'costs' effectively reduced to zero!

Elshstain, J.B. "Democracy and the QUBE Tube." *Nation*, August 7-14, 1982.

E-Democracy?

- Is 'democracy' just a matter of registering voters' preferences?
 - Electoral results are also a result of **electoral systems** - how do we choose one?
- More information does not necessarily lead to better decisions (and how!!!).
- Deliberative public policy choice →
 - privatised instrumental decisions.

Issues remain...

- Is the technology universally available?
- Are voters all equally capable of using it?
- How is the technology operated and who controls its use?
 - 'consultation': more informing than listening
- How do voters use the net?
 - 'balkanization', 'personalisation', indifference...

Democracy and technology

- **Do we want the net to...**
 - Improve our current style of democracy, or
 - Create a better, 'more democratic' democracy?
- **How do we think of technology 'politically'?**
 - **Neutral:** practical tools to solve democracy's problems
 - **Active** ('chosen'): created for a purpose by military, business, governments etc
 - **Autonomous:** develops according to technical rationality, independent

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Summary

- Communications technologies have affected how we 'do politics' in many diverse ways
- The value of these changes is highly variable
- Sometimes technology is not the answer
- Technology is not (necessarily) politically neutral

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Ends

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