

# Books

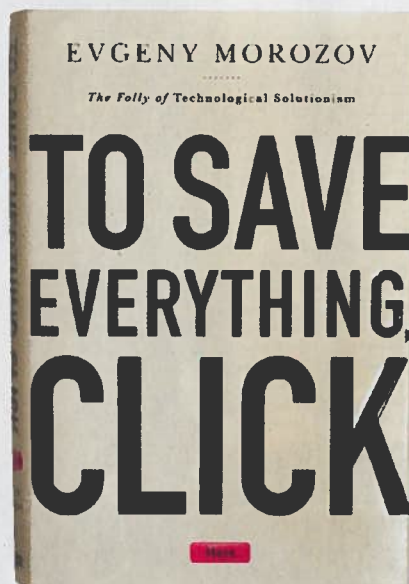
## Fight the Net Evgeny Morozov's war on digital perfectionism

By Bryan Walsh

IF YOU HAVE A PROBLEM, SILICON VALLEY has the solution. Struggling with your weight? Try self-tracking devices that record your calories in and calories out—and upload that data to the Internet for all to see. Fed up with city hall? Open government will hack the bureaucracy and allow citizens to take matters into their own hands. Plagued by crime? Predictive policing will prevent crime before it happens—or simply tweak the environment to ensure that lawbreaking is all but impossible. “Fitter, happier, more productive” might have been a chillingly robotic Radiohead refrain in the mid-1990s, but as the technology critic Evgeny Morozov points out in his provocative new book, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*, that line “would make an apt welcome sign in the corporate headquarters” of tech giants like Google and Facebook. They’re from Silicon Valley, and they’re here to help you—for a price.

Morozov’s skepticism might seem surprising. After all, what’s wrong with Internet companies’ tapping new technologies to help us live healthier and safer? But as he showed in his first book, 2011’s *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*—which made the contrarian case that social-networking tools like Twitter and Facebook could be and were being used as tools of government oppression—Silicon Valley’s best intentions sometimes backfire. There are the usual concerns about digital privacy, but Morozov’s real worries go further, to what he terms the tech world’s “solutionism”: the “recasting of all complex social situations either as neat 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.”

While the dotcom elite sees itself as using cutting-edge technology to slice



### Grand Slams. Morozov's best put-downs of the digital elite

On Steve Jobs: “The more diplomatic of Apple’s followers might say that Steve Jobs—bloodthirsty vegetarian, combative Buddhist—lived a life of paradoxes. A less generous assessment would be that he was an unprincipled opportunist—a brilliant but restless chameleon.”

On Internet guru Jeff Jarvis’ book *Public Parts*: “This is a book that should have stayed a tweet.”

On Elon Musk: “If Silicon Valley had a Scientology outlet, he’d probably be running it.”

On TED: “TED is an insatiable kingpin of international meme laundering.”

On California Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom: “To say that Newsom’s ruminations on technology and politics come in 50 shades of bull— is to give this all-too-representative study in online civic boosterism too much credit. Newsom’s bull— is solidly and tediously monochrome.”

through intractable social problems—and loves to congratulate itself for doing so—Morozov sees it as fundamentally undemocratic, rewriting the code of the social contract largely without public oversight. By grasping onto the latest digital solution to social problems (like predictive policing to fight crime), we risk ignoring the complex causes (poverty, underfunded schools) behind them. Sometimes the right algorithms can lead us to the wrong answer.

Take the way Morozov dissects the hot trend of self-tracking: using everything from wi-fi-connected wearable devices to cheap genomic tests to quantify data on an individual’s health and hopefully improve it. He doesn’t doubt that sophisticated calorie counters and apps might be able to help some people lose weight or better manage disease, though he reasonably worries that employers or insurers might eventually use that data to withhold health coverage. But as is often the case in *To Save Everything*, his real concerns are philosophical. He questions Silicon Valley’s assumption that the quantified self is the truest self, that we can find a deeper verity in empirically accurate, supported data than we can in the stories we tell about ourselves. Morozov fears Silicon Valley’s “imperialistic streak of quantification,” the tendency to value only what we can count and to ignore what doesn’t add up so easily. What the self-confident tech elites fail to realize is that our counting will always miss something. To Morozov, imperial quantification is a threat to human freedom, including our basic freedom to make mistakes. Like a true conservative—which he is, in his own way—he stands athwart the Internet, yelling “Stop!”

As Morozov writes, “Imperfection, ambiguity, opacity, disorder and the opportunity to err, to sin, to do the wrong thing: all of these are constitutive of human freedom, and any concentrated attempt to root them out will root out human freedom as well.” *To Save Everything* isn’t an easy book, though Morozov brings welcome wit to complex ideas. We may want to be fitter, happier, more productive—and the Internet may help us get there—but it’s far from clear that digital perfection is worth the price. ■