Transcript Q&A

The Limits of Technology in an Imperfect World

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Geoff White:

There's loads to chew on there. I'm intrigued by the idea of a surveillance dustbin. I love that. That's fantastic. It's George Orwell meets Dusty Bin. I wondered – there are microphones coming around – before we do that I'm intrigued though, put your hand up if you would opt for having a surveillance dustbin and you think that would help you in your life. Any takers for a surveillance dustbin? Not a single one.

Evgeny Morozov:

But it's not sold to you as something that will necessarily make your life easier. It's sold to you as an ethical product that will help you be a more responsible environmentally friendly citizen. Of course if you have a choice between a normal trash bin and a trash bin that is being monitored by your entire Facebook group, normal decision would be to say no, I don't want that.

But if you buy into the idea that we need to become more environmentally concerned... This is the logic and the rhetoric through which such smart devices are being sold to us. It's a way to save the world by making your trash bin smarter and making yourself a little bit easier to control and monitor by your peer group. In a sense, you can say that some of this is right. But you can then also go and start questioning... My problem with the dustbin is not the fact that it relies on surveillance. It's the fact that it has a particular almost market-driven logic where you are engaging in behaviour that is supposed to be moral and political, which is environmental protection or thinking about nature. You're being asked to engage in it simply because you want to accumulate points that you can then convert into something and you can compete against your friends and whatnot.

If we're sitting at South by Southwest (SXSW) conference in Texas, in Austin, which is the biggest gathering of all the technophilic people from Silicon Valley, you'd ask how many people love the idea of gamification and how many people think that gamification will help us fix problems of environment or problems of politics, I would assure you that most of the hands would go up because people do believe that that offers a new way of problem solving.

Question 1:

I love this idea, there's so much I like in that. Is there an upside to this nudge data accumulation so that you can use it to better support better policy

decisions? I can see the Google-esque players are not likely to make it available. But were it available in a new place where our policy decisions… because we can see the range of the nudges that are needed to be applied.

Evgeny Morozov:

It's a good question. Here I think the distinction is whether we would actually want to go for digging out complex causal explanations or whether we would just settle on correlations. Someone does X, you see output Y. That's how a lot of this data glamorization happens right now. It's people who self-track and people who self-track their health, for example, they would say that 'well, when I drink orange juice in the morning, I tend to feel much better in the evening. My data now shows it and I don't actually need to understand how orange juice affects my health because I can see the output and I don't need to understand any of the causal mechanisms.'

If you go and actually start reading very closely a lot of these excited papers and memos and white papers about big data, many of them do argue that now, since there is just so much data about what's happening, we can just sidestep the part about theory and move into just observation of correlations. That for many would be sufficient enough. You can actually look at the book that just came out, big data book by Viktor Mayer-Schönberger which actually makes that point, that correlations are enough and we have enough data.

I just think that in many business contexts it might in fact be enough. But if you are thinking about ambitious policy reform, you cannot help but look for causal explanations because otherwise, when you're trying to solve obesity and you know that people who walk tend to be more fit, if you rely on correlations alone what you would do is to hand out a pedometer to everyone or smartphone so that they can actually track how much they're walking without asking whether there is actually any space where they can walk.

There are very interesting questions here about causality, which I think we shouldn't sidestep, but broadly I agree with you that a lot of this will provide better data and will allow us to think and differ in different ways. Again, as long as we don't lose sight of the narrative and a lot of what the data conceals, and it conceals quite a lot.

Question 2:

I read somewhere, Evgeny, that you lock your smartphone away for most of the day and your cable. Was that a joke? Or are you really trying to opt out of the big data society?

Evgeny Morozov:

Hiding your smartphone and your cable is not going to let you opt out of the society. It's a joke that you can opt out. There is no opt-out now. We can talk about opt-outs – actually I want to talk about this myth of the opt-out. I don't think that the opt-out actually is a viable option. But I do it simply for productivity purposes. You have to understand how my safe works. It's a safe that has a timer in it. So you can actually set the time when the safe is supposed to open, and you cannot get into it otherwise. For me, it's a very great way to spend three days during the weekend completely undisturbed by anything because I've delegated my fight over whether I have to get online or not to my safe. There is no way to circumvent that. I don't have to constantly force myself into saying no.

I think it's wonderful. A lot of our relationship with technology has been about delegation. We delegate things to technology so that we don't have to worry about it ourselves. And I think it's okay. I do it with the safe, and again I don't see the internet as some kind of evil thing that will suck me in and I'll end up browsing photos of cats. There is plenty of good stuff that's happening on Twitter and I like going and checking links and there is plenty of stuff from Twitter that ended up in my blog.

But I also know that if you want to be a thinking person, you also need to go and read books and spend time on ideas that aren't just current and contemporary and you need to find some kind of balance. I just enforce that balance with the help of my safe. And it works. If you look at my productivity, I think it speaks for itself.

But that aside, the idea of the opt-out, we are presented often with this idea that we can always say no. You don't have to self-track. If everyone in this audience starts to self-track, like, what they've had for breakfast and how much you exercise and how much you walk, you can always make a decision not to and that decision will be respected. I just don't think that that logic works at the social level, because sooner or later we reach a point where people who don't self-track are being seen as people who have something to hide. You look suspicious when you don't self-track and your insurance

company will start treating you differently because they do think that you have something to hide, some health condition.

That already is how a lot of non-participation on things like Facebook works. If you don't have a Facebook account now and you're a young person living in America, go try renting an apartment through Craigslist. I can assure you that you will have a much harder time because most of the landlords would assume that you are just some kind of a weirdo who doesn't have friends, who is not on Facebook and who is just hiding something.

I don't think that the idea of the opt-out... I mean, you can opt out. But you will pay for it very dearly. When we are being told that, well, my decision to self-track is my decision alone, it doesn't affect everyone else... maybe it's not the case. Maybe there is a deeper ethics of self-tracking and maybe my decision to self-track through a chain of causality affects your decision to self-track or not to self-track.

That's the kind of discourse the people in Silicon Valley would hate to have, because it would mean that there are other considerations other than autonomy and efficiency that need to be put on the table. They're not comfortable in those discussions.

Geoff White:

Before we go on to the next question, quick straw poll. How many people want that safe? Put your hand up. How many people would have that safe? That's interesting.

Question 3:

I have to say, that is the most terrifying lecture I've heard, so far, and points, to me, to a perfectly ghastly world. Do you think that there's any possibility of it being held within some sort of boundaries? It's clearly open to huge abuse from determined political authorities. And if it's not possible to opt out, then that too will point to a horribly conformist and dictated world.

Evgeny Morozov:

There are several things here. First of all, again I didn't draw all the implications since we didn't have so much time. The thing about the trash bin, the smart trash bin means that essentially your trash is being routed through Facebook. Any law enforcement agency can turn to Facebook and figure out

what was in your trash bin three weeks ago because the photo of it is kept somewhere on Facebook servers. It's the kind of access that was not even possible before. So it is a world that looks much uglier if you think about it deeper than I could have delivered in the short time that I had.

With regards to accountability, I think there are things that we can do to hold it accountable. I'm not sure how we can hold this logic in check and prevent it from spreading to other fields, but with regards to accountability, one idea I discuss in the book is that we need some kind of algorithmic auditing. We need to figure out a way in which we can actually peer inside the black boxes of algorithms built by Google and Facebook and actually have someone step in and vouch for them, because right now there is no vouching and there is no auditing. Facebook and Google build algorithms that define how we live our lives, how we consume our information, and right now it's all about information consumption only.

Facebook has an algorithm which determines what news you see based on what your friends share. You have no idea how it does that. It has a user rank algorithm that is completely non-transparent and you might say that in the context of news sharing maybe it's not an important concern.

Once those algorithms break out from the internet and information consumption, and they enter the physical environment and they start regulating how we interact with buildings, how we interact with social institutions, you have self-driving cars! You have all sorts of algorithmically-driven entities and objects. We enter a situation where we do want to perhaps exercise a little bit more control without necessarily forcing companies to disclose the algorithms.

This is where I think the idea of auditing might actually not be a bad one to borrow from the financial sector, not that it has done the financial sector much good to prevent it from doing a lot of horrible things. But I think it will exercise at least some control. So you can have a third party step in and verify that there are no racial biases built into Google's algorithms.

Geoff White:

Who would be the third party in that case?

Evgeny Morozov:

It can be a commercial provider, it can be a body appointed by the government. There are all sorts of ways in which you can do auditing. I mean, right now you can see small steps towards this model when it comes to high-frequency trading. I mean, this is one element we already have a lot of crazy algorithmic stuff happening. So in Hong Kong and in Australia, regulators are already talking about... I think they already implemented the system for annual algorithmic audits where they can step in and examine the algorithms based on the way these high-frequency trading systems actually work.

I think that wouldn't be a bad idea to start applying that logic elsewhere. In part because I think so much is at stake, and particularly when you think about things like predictive policing. So again, I don't want to spend too much time with this, but predictive policing is the idea that you can gather a lot of data about past crimes, feed them into software run by algorithms and determine when crimes are likely to happen in the future. Apparently it works.

In LA and in many other American cities, predictive policing is being very popular with police departments. It tells them that, based on the data, crimes are likely to happen on Tuesdays at 2pm in this particular location, so we dispatch a police car and we prevent that crime from happening.

The problem is that we have no idea how those algorithms work. We have no idea if they incorporate any racial biases. We have no idea where they come from. I think if we are going to make decisions about who to arrest or where to send police, we might as well discover what are the algorithms are driving those systems.

It's the same with parole systems. In America now, you have the same system for deciding who gets in and who gets out of prison, where you have a lot of big data about previous people who have been released on parole and you have a set of algorithms. And you have a bunch of really enthusiastic computer science professors who form their own start-ups, who go around and pitch that system to prisons and all sorts of institutions without us having any idea about what are the algorithms that they use for predicting who to get out of jail.

It might be that there are no biases and no prejudices or anything in those algorithms, but it might very well be the opposite. I think we need to find ways in which to start examining what it is that powers so much of our life.

Question 4:

I had a question about the implications of this for developing countries. Is there a danger that developing countries with less penetration to this kind of technology get left out of this?

Evgeny Morozov:

Which would be great.

Question 4:

That was my question, and is that a good thing? Are these oases of calm where you don't have to be bothered with this sort of thing? Or is it creating a segregated, two-tier system and embedding poverty and social problems?

Evgeny Morozov:

It's a big question. If you look at Google in Africa, all sorts of things are happening there with Google going and mapping the entire African continent and paying people to put their businesses on the map. Google is playing a role in Africa as a private player that we would not always be comfortable with, say, the World Bank playing. We know there are all sorts of hazards and we know a lot about what happens in development.

But somehow a lot of these companies have taken on these public roles where, again, they claim to be saving the world and improving infrastructure and whatnot, but they're all driven by commercial incentives in the end and I just don't trust their world-saving rhetoric when it comes to problem-solving. Eventually they will abandon their problem-solving drive and focus on helping their shareholders.

We see it in our context all the time. I mean, now a lot of people are concerned about the death of Google Reader. Last week Google decided to shut down the popular RSS reader that everyone was using and suddenly we realize that, hey, maybe it would be nice to have some kind of publicly-run service for reading RSS and not just to place all of our bets in something run by a private company.

So there is no accountability there, and this is one of the issues that bothers me quite a bit about Silicon Valley. I mean, there is no way you can go and file a freedom of information request with Google. They're not responsible in the same way that government agencies are responsible, unless they take on a

lot of the responsibility for providing information infrastructure in Africa, Latin America or Asia or North Korea for that matter, or Burma, where Eric Schmidt goes with disturbing frequency... I'm just not sure that we would have the right sets of checks and balances in place to hold them accountable. I'm just not sure that having one giant company based in Silicon Valley take over resources that, on some reading, should actually be public goods, that it's such a good thing. Even though the company claims to be benevolent and saving the world and helping us and whatnot, I'm not convinced.

Looking at Google's track record in America; they don't decide based on some commitment to openness or some commitment to the interests of the internet. They decide based on their competition with Facebook and Google [*sic*], and essentially their share price. This is what accounts for much of Google's decision-making in America. And I don't think that it will be very different when you see them enter Africa or Asia or whatnot.

There are limits to their do-gooding and those limits are set by their share price.

Geoff White:

To keep an eye on those multi-national companies, do you not need a multi-national administrator, multi-national auditor for example? Do you see the policing of it going on in the country where the company is based? The US, in Google's example.

Evgeny Morozov:

That would be one step. I mean, you're asking me to solve too much. I can't solve the world governance problem and regulate Silicon Valley! I mean, there are issues where I think you do need some coordination. Obviously the law is also different. I think so far, Europe has been one place… Europe and Canada, for some reason, are the places that actually enforce how Google and Facebook behave.

They set the tone for what goes on at Google and Facebook. That's why I'm so much more keen to place my articles in Spanish and Italian and German newspapers than in American ones because I know there is no point in publishing in America because nothing is going to happen to Google or Facebook. No one there gives a damn, no regulation will ever happen.

You know that that's going to happen in Germany or Italy or Brussels. Those companies know it as well. This is where a lot of these battles are happening, because the data protection laws are much stronger in Europe. That's why Google and Facebook are so interested in weakening them or creating splinters with the European Union.

Question 5:

Thanks for your talk. I wanted to pick up on something you just talked about regarding commercial incentives. I mean it strikes me that wherever the companies we're talking about are coming from, whether it's from Asia, from Africa or the US, there's a commercial logic that dictates this because it's an inherently commercial space. It's not necessarily a public commons in many cases. There's a commercial logic that mediates all of our interactions. But I do reflect on the fact that all the companies we've talked about thus far come from a very particular part of the US and there's a social or political logic that underpins how those companies have evolved, in part because the US has a first mover advantage in this area, there's a logic that underpins the fundamental protocols of the internet.

I just wonder how you see that changing as, say, the next 2 billion people come online, most of whom will be from Asia, many of whom will have entrepreneurial tendencies, for better or worse, to participate in this space, how you see the particular logic that's evolved from Silicon Valley perhaps being challenged by commercial logic from other bits of the world that may, as you pointed out with Germany, be less favourable to Google street cars driving around and mapping all their wireless networks.

Evgeny Morozov:

There is a very bizarre clash of fake cosmopolitanism that you see in Silicon Valley where, again, the rhetoric is all about saving the world and being universal and going to Africa and North Korea and doing all those wonderful things for the world. At the same time, that cosmopolitanism is mixed with a very pernicious type of nationalism in America where Chinese and Russia and all sorts of other companies are looked on with suspicion.

So when Google sends its cars to map out China, the assumption is that in America, 'Hey this is just an act of humanitarianism, we're just mapping the world.' Imagine if Baidu would want to send its cars to go through Michigan to take photos of American houses and then send them back to China? It's not

going to be a very easy sell to the American public. It's going to be such a hard sell that Baidu doesn't even bother, because they know that it's not going to fly.

They see this with debates on 'who are they?' with big Russian and Chinese companies entering America. There is this very bizarre clash of perspectives. I'm not sure to what extent non-American companies would have much of a chance, frankly, when it comes to social services. In part because Google and Facebook are so entrenched already. They have become platforms on which new services are being built.

So it's much better for a local Chinese or Russian entrepreneur to go and build a map that would fit the Android market or that would fit Facebook and make money that way than to go and reinvent a social network and then build something from scratch. As long as those services have become platforms, they will just be very hard to displace. In a sense, everyone from Africa, India, Russia and Latin America will have to comply by the rules and norms set in America which can be good, which can be bad. But I'm far less optimistic about the ability to just come out of nowhere and take market share from those companies.

Question 5 cont'd:

…just one small version of conforming to the system …the Facebook and Google system, instead of actually challenging the parameters of the system itself? [portions inaudible]

Evgeny Morozov:

Yes, it doesn't have the obvious political dimension to it that I mentioned in self-tracking, but these companies are smart. They've built platforms and as long as you build a platform, you're much harder to displace than just running your own little shop.

Question 6:

I had a question about whose policies derive the waste bin and the various other things that you've been talking about. Technology, from your description, isn't set up to solve these problems; it's set up to enforce and to use some of the social elements online to do that. But who develops those policies? And who do we believe? The recycling one is a good example. Certainly in this

country, a very political issue. A lot of our recycling goes to landfill. We don't tell anybody about it. Do we listen to the local councils? Do we listen to what Facebook says? Do we listen to the recycling companies who are being subsidized, etc.?

There's a big question in there which I think echoes some of the points here about what are we actually enforcing using the technology.

Evgeny Morozov:

A lot of this runs on pure ideology. It doesn't run on policies. It runs on someone in Silicon Valley getting very excited about an idea like gamification and being able to award points for good behaviour, and then spreading that logic to every single walk of life, regardless of whether the context is actually a good match or not.

I think it's at the ideological level that we need to engage, and we haven't engaged in the last two decades. I mean, there are clear ideas about efficiency and frictionlessness that are quite continuous. I mean you heard Bill Gates talking about frictionless capitalism in 1995 and last year we get Mark Zuckerberg talking about frictionless sharing. Why do both of them talk about frictionlessness with such a huge gap without necessarily realizing that each said something to that effect before?

This is where I see my own contribution. I'm much more interested in tracing what kind of ideas and ideologies and frameworks inform how Silicon Valley thinks about itself and its own role and what is it that they do not see when they try to frame problems in a certain way. To me, this is very interesting, and there I see my own contribution.

Question 7:

Quickly a question about science in general: given that the early days of experimental science as espoused by Sir Francis Bacon were predicated on collecting a lot of data and then drawing conclusions from that, do you think this sort of new form of scaled algorithmic intelligence is good science or not?

Evgeny Morozov:

If you think that good science requires theories, then we're moving away from theories. I mean, if you've seen a big [*Wired*] cover story a few years ago, 'The end of theory' by Chris Anderson... again, the idea there is that the more

data you can accumulate, you don't need any theories. You can just say that this is how the world works. That's some bizarre longing for mediated knowledge, where you don't need to put anything to stand in the way and you can just look at the data and see what's happening.

I just think it's very naïve. I don't believe in the idea of unmediated anything. I think everything is mediated, whether by theories or by frameworks, ideologies, categories or whatnot. It's those histories that we need to uncover and understand. I don't think it's going to give us better science, no. It will give us a very different science and it might be somewhat less suitable towards solving the problems that we need to solve.

Question 8:

You talked about the impossibility of opt-out, but what about backlash? In terms of: are we really all happy to be so systematically and subtly controlled by this type of big data? I'm thinking particularly as consumers where your world is totally monitored.

Evgeny Morozov:

I think most of us are; that's the tragedy. I think most of us actually would love to track our own behaviour in order to get discounts from our insurance company. This is where I think our responses to the dilemmas of the age are completely inappropriate. Because all we've been doing in the last decade was passing new laws to protect data and building tools that will allow you to stay anonymous.

If you as a consumer are not interested in protecting your data, neither laws nor tools are going to make a difference. You voluntarily want to disclose it because you will get better insurance treatment or get something from your health company or you'll get a better discount at the nightclub. This is the logic in which much of this privacy debate currently runs.

It is in our interests to disclose it. The problem is that there are some groups in our society, the weakest ones, those who are not perfectly healthy, or those who have dangerous ideas or those who do have something to hide who are not at all benefiting from [the] self-disclosure that the rest of us are engaged in. And it's how we're going to defend them and how we're going to make sure that they are not discriminated against that will be the basis for much decision-making.

There will be backlash from them. But for most of us, there is no backlash. Most of us do get better treatment. That's the dirty secret that we don't want to discuss. Most of us would love to have a sensor in our car that will monitor everywhere we go and prove that we are safer than the average person that is built into all of the insurance models. Why? Because we are being appealed to as consumers who are saving money and not necessarily thinking about the well-being of other consumers and citizens.

I don't think the backlash is likely to upend our assumptions about the way things are going. I see the very opposite of a backlash, I see a sort of universal endorsement of these tracking technologies by consumers themselves.

Geoff White:

And on that cheery note, time is up. I should tell you it is the last day of voting today for the Chatham House Prize winner 2013; you can vote in the lobby. Ladies and gentlemen, a big round of applause for Evgeny Morozov.