TECHNOLOGY

# Techno–fix troubles

Two analyses challenge the idea of the Internet as a panacea for social ills, finds **Nicholas Carr**.

In his introduction to the 1995 edition of *Engines of Culture* (Transaction), social scientist Daniel Fox lamented the rise of "technocratic solutionism". Frustrated by the messiness of politics, intellectuals were retreating to a simplistic view of social progress, predicated on a belief that "problems have technical solutions even if they are the result of conflicts about ideas, values and interests". In technology's promise of the quick fix, disheartened thinkers found comfort.

Some 20 years on, the appeal of solutionism is stronger than ever, thanks to rapid advances in the analytical and communicative powers of computers. The hopes of today's solutionists centre on the Internet. In its decentralized, 'peer-to-peer' architecture, they see a model for a more democratic polity. And in its bulging databases, they see a digital Rosetta Stone that, once decoded, will allow us to decipher the causes of social ills from obesity to government corruption. If we can just get the algorithms right, the thinking goes, we'll be able to solve our most intractable problems in an illuminating burst of statistical analysis.

The Internet has been around for long enough to put its curative powers to the critical test. Two authors — social theorist Evgeny Morozov and computer scientist Jaron Lanier — argue independently that the Net is too blunt an instrument to solve complex societal problems. Far from being a cure-all, the network actually aggravates some maladies, such as the concentration of economic power, that many assumed it would remedy.

In *To Save Everything, Click Here*, Morozov provides an astute, if sometimes shrill, critique of contemporary solutionists and their reductive assumptions. He describes the way in which "Internet centrism" has skewed our discussions of everything from law enforcement to public health. It may be tempting, he writes, to recast complicated cultural and political phenomena as "transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimized", but this usually culminates in simplistic prescriptions that do more harm than good. Painstaking analyses are replaced by vague

**To Save Everything Click Here: Technology, Solutionism and the Urge to Fix Problems That Don't Exist**
EVGENY MOROZOV
*Allen Lane: 2013. 432 pp. £20*

**Who Owns the Future?**
JARON LANIER
*Allen Lane: 2013. 384 pp. £20*

bromides: embrace "openness", "sharing" and "virality", let information do its thing, and our problems will solve themselves.

Morozov points to the rise of 'crowd-funding' as an example. Online exchanges such as Kickstarter broaden the reach of venture capitalism by allowing people to make small investments in commercial and creative projects being undertaken by individuals and small businesses. The US singer Amanda Palmer, for example, raised more than a million dollars on Kickstarter to fund the recording of a solo album. The combination of automated transactions and an open marketplace is intoxicating to today's efficiency-minded technophiles, who have been quick to promote such sites as replacements for cash-strapped arts councils.

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But, Morozov contends, crowd-funding is in thrall to the herd instinct. It funnels money towards endeavours that generate buzz rather than demonstrate merit, and it encourages artists to act as marketers and hucksters. He points to a recent study of documentary film-making in Britain that suggests that online contributors tend to concentrate their money in polemical features that promote a fashionable "activist agenda". They are much less likely to back documentaries that seek to explore contentious issues objectively and in depth. Crowd-funding is a solution only if you misjudge the problem.

Although Morozov is right to stress how technological determinism can warp political debates, he ends up going too far in the opposite direction. He claims that "the Internet" — his quotation marks — is largely a rhetorical construct, a sort of popular myth, and that it lacks any inherent qualities that might shape the behaviour of its users.

Digital technologies, he asserts, "are not the causes of the world we live in but rather its consequences". This is a naive view of large-scale networks, and it lets Morozov sidestep difficult questions about the way the Net, like the highway system and the electric grid before it, moulds our economy and culture in its own image.

Lanier offers a more searching examination of the Internet's defects in *Who Owns the Future?*. The Net's workings, he argues, have been shaped by an ideology that, although well-intentioned, has deformed our commercial and social relationships. By mistaking free information for freedom, the network's designers and defenders have inadvertently created a system that centralizes power and profit. Companies such as Google and Facebook take in billions of dollars by hosting online exchanges, but the people who actually create whatever is being exchanged — words, ideas, works of art — often get nothing. The joy of participation, they're told, should be compensation enough.

As digital networks come to regulate more of the economy, Lanier sees a perverse dynamic taking hold. Wealth concentrates around those who control the servers and databases, whereas risk spreads outwards to the masses. He points to the banking crisis of 2008 as an example. By erasing local market boundaries and controls, computerized financial systems helped to funnel riches to a handful of bankers and traders — yet when the system collapsed, it was ordinary citizens who paid the bill.

The only way to change the dynamic is to redesign our computer networks to be a little less efficient and a little more egalitarian. Lanier imagines a "symmetrical" web, in which every piece of information is linked back to the person who created it. Copying the information triggers a "micropayment" to its creator. By placing a price on information, you constrain a company's ability to track and manipulate people and to reap windfalls by exploiting massive data stores.

Many of Lanier's proposals, including his call to assign everyone "a universal online identity", will be controversial. And some of them, such as the micropayments scheme — which would require the value of every Facebook update and blog comment to be calculated — seem far-fetched. But, like Morozov, Lanier does a service by challenging us to address societal problems as humanists, not engineers. ∎

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