Opposing the Exceptionalism of the Algorithm

Evgeny Morozov

Evgeny Morozov is one of the most outspoken critics of Silicon Valley and its techno-opportunism. In his publications, he has challenged the claims that social media should be seen as a tool for political emancipation and that technological advancement equates to social progress. He recently addressed the technocratic expectations for big data and algorithms as problem solving machines for public administration and social organization.

It is claimed that algorithms and private companies are better than public institutions at solving societal problems. What is your take on this?

The public institutions that we currently have in place have emerged partly thanks to the emergence of the developers’ state and are therefore already predisposed to algorithmic optimization. Welfare for a poor, disadvantaged group presupposes that spending can be optimized by surveillance and in the US, for instance, the system has been expansive in monitoring the recipients of food stamps and other kinds of aid. This was built into the democratic apparatus of the welfare state and public institutions alongside a drive towards effectiveness, efficiency and leanness. The entrance of new players to make things faster, cheaper and more expansive is not unexpected.

I would not necessarily worry about the displacement of public institutions by algorithms because these institutions already have some algorithmic background. For example, institutions that you would associate with the public realm like taxi companies – publicly regulated in a way that Uber is not – have a very rudimentary capacity to match supply and demand. Previously, this was done by phone dispatchers and not a digital algorithm. In a sense, I would argue, even the phone dispatcher can be seen as an algorithm. These dispatchers weren’t particularly efficient, but they matched supply to demand nonetheless. The entrance of companies into the market that do this more quickly, cheaply, effectively and efficiently is not necessarily a big departure from that model.

Within the philosophy of law and within the legal tradition, there is a huge debate as to whether judges discover law or whether they apply it.
If you stick to the view that they just apply it, then you argue that judges work in a very mechanistic, algorithmic manner. They take a set of rules and they generate an interpretation of those rules. Where exactly sources of that interpretative power come from is a question you can investigate and debate. But even that process in itself, depending on which philosophy of law you opt for, can be seen from the algorithmic perspective. The process of displacing public institutions with private ones is a different matter. It has to do with the nature of private companies providing services previously provided by the State. In some respects, this displacement is better and in some respects, it’s worse. However, I don’t think that algorithms are the dividing line between the two. The qualitative difference then would be that the new services or new industries are running on cheaply available data. Before the State was the primary collector of data and now we have those industries collecting data. That enables them to take over certain functions in a different way.

Banks, loan companies and Experion, not to mention all the other data collectors, were in the business way before technology companies. With my work, I consistently try to oppose the exceptionalism of ‘the internet’. In this case I don’t think that the collection of data by private companies has much to do with the internet. The scale has changed, if you look at the aggregation of banks and how they decide whether to give you a loan or not. The principle that banks use for generating a credit score, which in turn determines whether you are eligible for a loan, is not that different from the kind of reputation economy that Uber and Airbnb want to develop for determining if you are a trustworthy customer. That principle has its origins in banking far more than in the technology industry.

Obviously, there is far more data generated about lifestyle by individuals. This is in part because we have shifted to a society where devices can easily generate data. That data is useful for all sorts of purposes, but I don’t think that if an insurance company could have grabbed that data 80 years ago, they wouldn’t have grabbed it. Nothing has changed in the epistemic assumptions of how capitalism operates that made companies suddenly realize that data was valuable. It was always valuable but very hard to grab before. I would also challenge the assumption that only governments collected it in the past. If you look at the history of regulation of credit scores in Europe, you can argue that in Germany there were legal barriers as to what kind of data can be legally incorporated and analysed by a bank when they are determining whether to give you a loan, but the data was collected nonetheless.
What impact does delegating public services to algorithms have on society?

You can answer the question in a highly theoretical mode or an empirical mode. I will answer it in the empirical mode, in that I have zero conviction that the decisions that have been taken by humans and institutions have been just or fair in most cases. Plenty of discrimination happens with regard to race, class, gender and so forth. We should not glorify human decision-making just because it is human. Social biases exist regardless of whether algorithms or computers are doing the job. With algorithms you can actually create an audit trail and see the exact reasoning process that led to the decision. The problem is that the corporatization of algorithmic decision-making will also result in more opacity within the algorithms. Because many of them will be proprietary, we won’t be able to examine them and look inside them. There will be certain domains where I would like to have human critics, but that has to do with critical thought and the experience of quality rather than decision-making. I would like food critics to go and think about food as opposed to generating an algorithm aggregating Yelp opinions, not because I reject algorithms, but because food is something that requires a very different kind of decision-making.

There is no way I would trust institutions to delegate public services in a fair and responsible manner. But switching back to the theoretical mode, I don’t think this should be impossible. Much depends on how much trust and faith you have in the State. In Europe, I see few reasons to trust a State which has been dismantling itself. So why would I trust it to enact a switch to algorithms? But again, here the distrust doesn’t have to do with the algorithms, or even with the corporate nature of people doing the shift; it has to do with the nature of the public institutions and the State as it exists in Europe.

What can civil society do to preserve their democratic values?

They should develop long term strategies for rethinking ways of political representation, engagement and process. To some, representative democracy is overrated. In Europe and America, it has lent itself to capture by forces that have more or less deprived it of whatever democratic potential it had. I would be happy to experiment with alternative forms of decision-making and governance beyond representative democracy. Perhaps direct democracy would not be a bad alternative. The specific institutional arrangements can be discussed later, but I think a lot of it would involve not
getting confused (which much of Europe is now). People are pursuing fake and false emancipation strategies (e.g. collaborative economy, peer-to-peer, and makerspaces). They find ways to accustom themselves to the rather dire state of affairs and then think that their particular little project, which now involves some kind of technological component, is the way to resolve contradictions. I am not convinced of this.

I am pushing for direct political engagement. I don’t mean voting and showing up at elections, but actually analysing questions that we would traditionally qualify as political: Who makes decisions? Who owns what? Who runs what? How much legitimacy do certain institutions have or should they have? These questions are much more relevant for thinking about our future than questions about certain technological aspects. It might not be so useful for your book, but I just can’t fake it anymore.