Collective responses to digital neofeudalism

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How has the digital dream of the 1990s – equality, freedom of expression and accessibility for everyone – turned into the constantly surveilled dystopia that many observers comment on today? New media expert Evgeny Morozov and sociologist Colin Crouch discussed this digital dilemma at the recent Lector in Fabula festival, in conversation with journalist Marina Lalovic.

The father of what is called cyberpunk, Bruce Sterling, claims that Alphabet (i.e. Google), Apple, Microsoft, Facebook and Amazon now represent not just the main actors of digital neofeudalism, but five new ‘churches’. This digital oligarchy represents the consequence of what at the beginning was supposed to bring equality, freedom of expression and accessibility for everyone. Earlier digital initiatives, like the free software movement and Linux, were once symbols of this kind of dream. But the dream has become a nightmare.

How did we arrive at this point? And how did our digital idols become our worst enemies? In a public debate at the Lector in Fabula festival held in Conversano, Italy, on 15 September 2017, Marina Lalovic, journalist and presenter at the Italian public broadcaster Rai-Radio3 Mondo, posed these questions to Evgeny Morozov, sociologist, journalist and new media expert, and Colin Crouch, sociologist and Emeritus Professor at the University of Warwick, and the thinker who coined the term ‘post-democracy’.

Evgeny Morozov, Marina Lalovic and Colin Crouch at the 2017 Lector in Fabula Festival. Photo: Fondazione “Giuseppe Di Vagno (1889-1921)”

Evgeny Morozov: I think that ‘digital revolution’ as a term has always been rather ambiguous. It describes processes that are cultural, economic and political at the same time. Starting from this cultural and economic point of you, in the last ten years we can agree with the fact that something revolutionary has happened. We shop differently, some of us make money differently, our personal and emotional relations are different because of this digital mediation. One of the
most representative examples is the comparison of top-ten firms in the world ten years ago and today. Ten years ago just one of these ten firms was a technology firm: Microsoft. Today, five out of ten are on this list.

We have to be aware of the political impact though.

If we start from the early nineties, technology offered a possibility of voice for those who hadn't got one. In that sense, the free software movement and open source were a useful attempt to challenge some of the power that had already been consolidated within software companies. They didn’t give the answer to a world where digital is everywhere and where the licensing of software is just one single aspect. They didn’t question the ownership of data, where data today could perhaps replace software. Because of that, not having a fully holistic vision of how hi-tech companies were developing, they missed the question of today: what are these new modes of accumulating wealth and creating value that drive the new economy?

Marina Lalovic: With regards to post-democracy, a term created by Professor Colin Crouch, we can look towards the political aspect of the digital revolution we are now having to tackle. The crisis of political identity and the globalization of democracy are reflected mostly on the internet. The place which was supposed to represent the highest level of freedom of expression, we can now compare with the metaphor of the panopticon, the ideal prison. What remains of the term post-democracy today, in 2017?

**Colin Crouch:** In the early nineties it seemed that new free resources would be inserted into politics.

My understanding of post-democracy is that the most important political powers are in the hands of small elites. So if you get the new resources that are not controlled by the elites, you have the challenge. The appearance is deceptive.

The first question is why we shifted so fast from the environment where thousands of different groups were controlling the internet towards five single actors? We might compare it with the print press, but it took a long time until we had the concentration of a mass media.

The product of the internet is a network and today everyone wants the biggest possible one. The more contacts you have, the more purpose this network has. This logic causes a very rapid concentration. If you want to organize a protest you just need your network.

Political campaigns are gathering data on individual citizens and targeting publicity on these citizens. To do that, you need enormous databases. So yes, a small group of citizens can organize a protest, but a major political party, backed by billionaires, can invest in targeting publicity at individuals.

Behind political power, there is more a hidden one, which consists of financial power. But
today we can also talk about digital power, and ask ourselves how to fight technological manipulation both from a political and economic point of view. How can we gain awareness of how to fight digital manipulation?

Evgeny Morozov: Financial and technological power are increasingly interconnected, which is the reason for the expansion of the firms like Uber, which was mostly financed thanks to institutional investment. Most finance capital has found its way towards technology, because that is the only sector that can guarantee high profit.

The point is that if we seek everyday solutions or awareness, we could end up risking the amplifying the power of these digital companies. Today we have arrived at a stage where we have to pay for software that will disconnect us from our internet connection. An MIT survey, from a couple of months ago, asked people how much would they be willing to be paid to avoid using tools like Google Maps, Google Search, YouTube. Most respondents said that they wouldn’t touch Google for €16,000 per year. Some said they wouldn’t use Google Maps for €3,000.

But we are not supposed to frame the problems of the digital society as individual problems that can be bought or sold. That is the problem number one that perpetuates the existing problem. Privacy as such can’t be a kind of a benchmark. Privacy can be delivered by the market. We can pay to get the most sophisticated apps which can guarantee our privacy. But this is not the privacy that I want. I don’t want privacy delivered to me as a service, I want privacy delivered as a right. If we were to think politically rather than individualistically, as citizens and not as consumers, what is that we should target? From the moment we cross the street, we are providing data to digital companies. Everything is grabbing data. Why should that data belong not to the municipality but to some company in California that turns people into billionaires and impoverishes citizens?

And here most governments have failed to provide an answer, while they focus on the issue of taxation. So the question is, how do we put this issue on the agenda of political institutions?

We must shift from the individual towards the collective level. What are the new legal and economic changes that need to happen for these firms not to simply go on as they do now?

Social media today might represent a form of political expression for youngsters. What might be the political and collective response?

Colin Crouch: The question here is the same as in the old economy: how do we deal with the large corporate power? That’s because corporate power has been depoliticized for about thirty years now. We arrived to the equation that corporations are smart and can do actual things, whereas governments are stupid. And it is a very long path for politics to come back from that and understand that privatization creates private monopolies in place of public ones.
We failed to understand that corporate power represents the major problem. So the internet issue is just part of this more general thing. We need to repoliticize the question of corporate power.

Internet technology was one of the main instruments in individualizing choices. The individual choice makes us disconnected from the collective and represents a kind of a myth because behind the liquid nature of information technology stands solid blocks of controlling power in the hands of a small number of individuals and corporations.

Between 2013 and 2016, just because of Google and Facebook, the EU says it has lost €5.4 billion in terms of taxes. How important is this ‘web’ taxation that EU is fighting for?

**Evgeny Morozov:** On my opinion, it is a bit of a utopian point of view to think that there is unity on the issue of web taxation at the European level. Luxembourg, Ireland and the Netherlands have actually become tax havens within the EU and through them tech companies have managed not to avoid but to reach the minimum tax level. If we want to avoid this problem, we need to go after the Dutch, Irish and Luxembourgers. Europe has no strategy at all to tackle this digital issue. This is why you have five American firms dominating in the EU, and you have four or five Chinese firms dominating as well. The technological future of Europe is to be a colony of either the USA or of China. In Europe there is no technological platform comparable to the US or Chinese platforms. So that’s the real tragedy of Europe.

What kind of revolution can we expect from the internet? According to Professor Crouch, the last real revolution was organized by the Occupy movement.

**Colin Crouch:** The movements that challenged elites in the past were based on class interest. They were rooted in social identities. The great difficulty of the movements of the present is finding this kind of connection. So the groups remain, rather, groups of isolated individuals and activists. The only exception nowadays is represented by those who say, ‘I speak for this nation, for this race against people from other nations and other races’. And this is why we have Trump, Brexit, AfD, Le Pen. This kind of rhetoric does not lead in any progressive direction. Stressing the nation does not help you to solve any problem.

The real revolution of tomorrow includes the dehumanization of the labour force, but are we the ones responsible for this mass self-destruction?

**Evgeny Morozov:** We have to rethink the applicability of the concept of surveillance. If we think just about the geopolitical aspect, the power of national security, all of the things revealed by Edward Snowden, then clearly the paradigm of surveillance is more valid than it ever was.

With regards to the economic point of view, with these firms taking over our lives,
we need a new paradigm.

So we have to shift from the concept of surveillance towards data extraction. This is what these companies do: they extract as much data as possible from us, about our fears and desires. None of us is aware of it. So the reason why so many of us feel tired and exhausted after spending half an hour scrolling through our Facebook feed is because these systems are made to maximize the number of clicks you make on the platform. The exhaustion that we feel after using these instruments is a consequence of this data extraction mechanism. So what do they do with all these data?

Firstly, they sell advertising. They need to know who we are, what are our desires, because of that they can match us with advertisers, in order to sell certain things. Obviously, the more they know about us, the more they can charge for advertising.

Secondly, and the more important aspect of this data extractivism, is the fact that they use all this information for building artificial intelligence. AI now operates as deep learning, which works by feeding a lot of data into the system and using data to teach the machine to, for example, learn the difference between a car and a person, a traffic light and the pavement.

Let’s take the example of truck drivers. Every time they use Google, they help this company to develop systems for autonomous driving, including systems for self-driving trucks. These drivers will find themselves essentially unemployed. And they ask themselves, how come that Google became so smart? But it was the same truck driver who helped the system to develop and to make him unemployed.

So we have not just to focus on privacy and surveillance, we need to bring the questions of work and labour to the table, and then we have to think about what might be the solutions to make this economy work differently. So the question is, what are the real consequences of this kind of a process?

I’m deeply against reducing this political issue into some moralistic choices in a market place. So yes, in the short term you can find strategies to defend yourself. But if I were you, I would bring together people who are neighbours and tackle the problem together. Again, the solution here is not just to buy a better app and to seek some ethical label connected to a web platform. You’ll have everybody celebrating this. But that’s not the answer. Clearly the problem here is political. And it is only by encountering it socially together with other people, that we can confront it as it should be confronted.

With respect to native digital generations, how can we preserve critical thinking in a world affected by constant distraction?

**Colin Crouch:** There are no personal solutions. This issue is similar to climate change. There is no such a thing as an individual choice. It’s probably not as bad as climate change, because we could continue living with this internet control
thing. It will require enormous political mobilization. The issue needs to be brought onto the political agenda, but right now it seems that no political party is willing to do it and most of us cannot understand it. It’s the worst kind of political issue. It’s extremely difficult to understand the problem and to relate your own identity to it in any big way.