

## Scholars' Self-serving Internet Obsession Should Give Way to Debunking Media Myths – Especially the One about the Internet Being So Very, Very Important

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The essay criticizes much of the scholarship on the internet in a consciously polemical, even flippant way. For sometimes the rules and jargon of academic discourse are more restrictive than enabling. The main argument is that many media scholars overestimate the influence of the internet. They do this, in part, because they specialize in studying the media and in certain cases because highlighting the importance of the internet serves their professional self-interest. But the undeserved focus on the internet detracts from critical examinations of society as a whole, in particular the nefarious influence of neo-liberalism.

Internet | Scholarship | Robert W. McChesney  
Evgeny Morozov | Twitter | Facebook

### The Standard Introduction

It is a standard trope to begin an article on the media with the tired observation that media are all around us. We consume them for hours and hours, every day. We are the fish oblivious to the water we are in. What is the first thing many people do when they wake up? Check their smart phone! And the last thing? Okay, I gave that one away already. Never have I read or encountered a media scholar who has downplayed the supposed significance of such self-serving observations. Nonetheless, the fact that they are the standard stuff of textbook introductions should give us pause. Many people, likely the majority of the world's population, still visit the bathroom first thing in the morning, just as they did in analog times. Media scholars don't ask: What is the second thing people do when they wake up? And the third, and the fourth? Media scholars do not ask these questions, in part, because they have a professional stake in making people (including their students) believe in the personal and societal importance of the media. Often, scholars themselves are utterly convinced of the utter importance of the media, which, these days, usually means the internet.

### The Main Point

The main point of this essay is that scholars of media and communication vastly overestimate the importance of the topics they just happen to study, in particular the internet. Frequently, this sort of overestimation leads to hyperbolic language. Take Robert W. McChesney. He writes:

*Any history of the past three decades will give prominent, if not preeminent, attention to the emergence of the Internet and the broader digital revolution. In the second decade of the twenty-first*

*century, signs point to its being a globally defining feature of human civilization going forward, until it eventually becomes so natural, so much a part of the social central nervous system, as to defy recognition as something new or distinct to our being, like speech itself. (McChesney 2013: 1)*

No, not true. Many histories won't emphasize the internet in characterizing or explaining recent and defining world events. Or at least I hope so. Otherwise, the historians would utterly disappoint me, for they have solid reasons not to pay too much attention to the "digital revolution." The McChesney quote is not just hyperbolic, but reveals the built-in bias towards studying the western middle and upper classes. How about histories of the Middle East, for instance? Wars in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, anyone? Would a *People's History of the Middle East* covering the last thirty years give prominence, let alone preeminence, to the internet? Let us conjure up, for a moment, the dying and displaced children, the raped women, the men missing a limb to exploded ordnance, the poisoned environment, the countless destroyed or stolen treasures of ancient civilizations? What would the victims' informed opinion be on the *interesting* theoretical question of the influence of the internet in their demise?

How prominent a role has the internet played in the slaughters in the Middle East? Compared to victims of bombs delivered by conventional means, how many human beings have been murdered by remote-controlled drones? Not many. We can be assured that without drones the killing would have been massive, still. The Vietnam War, anyone? And where was the internet when the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003 was imminent? It failed to rescue the doomed people of Iraq. One can imagine a useful empirical test emerging from a simple question. How many lines has seasoned Middle-East reporter Robert Fisk written about the internet? While scholars pored over massive amounts of painstakingly gathered data precisely with the aim of discovering how Twitter and Facebook supposedly fomented revolutions – which ultimately did not succeed, fizzled out, disappointed – people were dying in the streets all over the Middle East, courtesy of distinctly analog means. Were Stalin still alive, God forbid, he might well have asked dismissively: "The internet? How many divisions has it got?"

Or let us consider the recent history of the birthplace of the internet, the United States. Isn't the internet a mere facilitator, not a *sine qua non* to the rise of neo-liberalism? Without the internet, capitalism would have found other ways to wreak havoc on human communities and environments. Granted, the internet has had an additional smattering of cultural impacts, e.g. on dating. But, the internet did not principally kill mainstream journalism. Corporate greed did. Or at least mortally wounded it (McChesney and Nichols 2010). Its demise began before the internet went mainstream in the US and would very likely have continued, in one form or another, without it. In fact, the internet and especially

thinking about the internet have contributed to erecting a barrier against becoming aware of and criticizing the socioeconomic and political tolls that neo-liberalism has exacted globally. One should hope that the widespread hope pinned on the internet to (help) usher in a more just and well-informed society has been destroyed by the Trump-tsunami. Every unnatural disaster has a silver lining. Crises, for instance as a result of what Joseph Schumpeter called “creative destruction,” present opportunities, as the neo-liberals are well aware.

“The Internet has long since stopped being optional,” writes McChesney. Okay. But so what, exactly? In the 1980s telephones were hardly optional. Unless, or perhaps especially, you lived on a mountain in Montana. But which historian of the 1980s has given “prominent, if not pre-eminent, attention” to the phone network? It is not phones that people (should) remember from the 1980s. It is father losing his factory job and the monumental failure of ‘trickle-down economics’ to attend to the needs of working families. Ordinary people whose minds, for the most part, are blessedly untainted by ‘media theory’ of course realize that their phone conversations from the 1980s exerted no defining influence on their lives, whereas the corporate influence over politics made some people very rich, impoverished many more, and killed others. In short, by continually talking about the internet, the topic is given much more prominence than it deserves. The internet is the current ‘worthy topic’ in media and communications scholarship. It receives detailed and awed attention. Everything else is considered an ‘unworthy topic.’ How I often wish that what happens on the internet stays on the internet!

McChesney is, by the way, one of the sharpest media scholars alive today. Moreover, he fights the good fight. He has himself cogently argued that we need to understand capitalism in order to understand the internet. In other words, and in his defense, he would agree with my point that the internet should be heavily contextualized within the past, current and likely future political economy. But that is exactly the point. Even he has not escaped the trap of over-estimating the importance of the internet. The internet myths roll downhill from the heights of the scholarly Olympus. They rampantly multiply in the valleys.

### The Illustrative Quotes

Ever wanted to scream when confronted with a bunch of email alerts on new internet research? That’s what I am talking about. That’s where I am right now. So should you. Enter a wonderful, idiosyncratic novel. It is called *I Hate the Internet* and is written by Jarett Kobek. What follows is not the expected, obligatory summary. This would be useless. The novel has no story worthy of attention. The characters are obvious pawns in the writer’s master plan. *I Hate the Internet* is a self-professed *bad* novel. Instead, here are some representative quotes:

*J. Karacehennem, whose last name was Turkish for Black Hell, went to Egypt one month after its Facebook revolution led to the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, a dumb asshole who had been in power for thirty years.*

*Lots of Egyptians talked to J. Karacehennem about the protests. Many had been in the protests.*

*No one mentioned Facebook. No one mentioned Twitter.*

*Mostly people talked about money and how they had none. (Kobek 2016: 404)*

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*She’d suffered fifteen years hearing about how the Internet would transform American culture and open new avenues of expression.*

*But in the end, it was only more people talking about television. (Kobek 2016: 1900)*

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*The consensus, at the New York Times and elsewhere, was that the iPhone and iPad had changed everything. (Kobek 2016: 2409; emphasis in original)*

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*The curious thing was that Facebook and Twitter and Tumblr and Blogspot, a media platform owned by Google, were the stomping grounds of self-styled intellectual and social radicals. It was where they were talking. It was where, they believed, the conversation was shifting.*

*They were typing morality lectures into devices built by slaves on platforms of expression owned by the Patriarchy, and they were making money for the Patriarchy. Somehow this was destroying the Patriarchy.*

*So there’s always hope.*

*The illusion of the internet was the idea that the opinions of powerless people, freely offered, had some impact on the world. This was, of course, crazy bullshit and based on a crazy idea of who ran the world.*

*The world was not run by its governments. The world was not run by its celebrities.*

*The world was run by its bankers. The world was run by its investor class. The world was run by its manufacturers. (Kobek 2016: 2880-2886)*

You get the gist. A great feature of the novel, in short, is the curt ways in which it dismisses anything that smacks of internet-centrism and -fetishism. And then it quickly moves

on. For what else is there to say? To a large extent the internet is yet another red herring in the required opposition to rapacious capitalism that will kill this planet, possibly per its unlikely instrument of choice called Trump. His 'effective' use of Twitter is yet another red herring. Trump needed Twitter, *not*. Neither did Hitler need radio. They needed economic despair and prejudices.

Scholars churn out endless books, articles, op-eds, even tweets, minutely examining an aspect of 'the internet.' *I Hate the Internet* shows a way out. We need to dispel the mountains of PDF files of considered scholarly research full of nuanced musings and data on 'the internet and its effects' (*sic!*). If we continue thoughtlessly contemplating the seriousness of this mountain and keep building it, the mountain will give way someday and bury us in an avalanche of bullshit. We need curt dismissal of the existing scholarship to be able to see afresh again. The Big Bad Wolf huffs and puffs: Pffff!!!!! Lo and behold! The towering construct of scholarly pdf files dissipates in the air, as if they are mere analog pieces of paper.

### The Considered Interlude

If the reader has not realized it until now, but for some odd reason has kept reading, let me spell it out. In this essay I am not asking to be taken literally. But I am asking to be taken seriously. Being literal sometimes limits one in expressing one's feelings forcefully enough. I know no other way to communicate my often-felt despair with internet research. What I am doing here, then, is foregoing the traditional way of scholarly writing and debate, because sometimes the scholarly point sedates the mind, gets lost in jargon as its tropes bound free thinking.

Sometimes "truthful hyperbole," a favorite phrase of Donald Trump, if you can believe it, is necessary to draw attention to neglected issues that urgently need addressing (Blair 2016). So, of course, I am not truly arguing that the existing academic research on the internet is useless. I also do not wish to say that doing that research did not require effort and skill. It did. What I am saying is that it is *also* true that, for some purposes and considered from a particular vantage point, the research is quite insubstantial, when you actually think about it. Most importantly, I am saying we take the internet way too seriously. We exaggerate its importance first thing in the morning, even before we check our smartphone.

### The Internet Saved the Media Scholar

Academic faculty are more risk averse these days than they were over the past decades, according to McChesney. I believe he is right. In the neoliberal age of tenure threatened increasingly by, say, poor 'impact factors' and disappearing pensions, we aim, too often, to play it safe:

*I sense there is a small "C" conservatism among graduate students and among faculty now that existed to a much lesser extent 20, 25, 30 years ago. There is a fear, and I guess that comes from wanting to get a job, not wanting to get in trouble...* (McChesney in Schwartz 2014: 175)

McChesney is admirably polite and understanding about it, but he makes clear that he himself considers much of the 'internet scholarship' insubstantial:

*You look at some of the young hires, they're doing what I would consider uninteresting work on conventional stuff and maybe they've got a few new buzzwords. Maybe they're using computers in new ways. It's the same old stuff, but they insert social media and a few trendy, sexy terms and they march around the room with a PowerPoint and act like they're breaking new ground when they're saying nothing original. And I don't put them down for that, because this is what's being encouraged.* (McChesney in Schwartz 2014: 177)

Behold the damaging ironies. Neo-liberalism creates job insecurities. "Growing worker insecurity," as Chomsky (2012) noted, makes "working people" play it safe. And it turns out that scholars are workers too. The resulting internet-centrism of the scholarship obscures the killer nature of neo-liberalism, deflecting attention away from it. Well done, neo-liberalism! By creating uncertain labor conditions in academia you prod academics to obscure your own crimes. So smart! Smarter than a smart phone! Your machinations equal Edward Bernays' most brilliant work. Do departments even still hire non-internet scholars? Are there still scholars brave enough to openly admit that they do not study the internet?

So we make our research and worldviews more palatable to the academic job market by placing the internet at the center of our research and teaching. Conscientious as we are, we read as much as we can of the scholarship on the internet, which reinforces the centrality of the internet in society — as if we still need more convincing. It's a simple psychological mechanism: What you focus on becomes bigger in your mind. In short, overestimating the importance of media, especially the internet, is an occupational hazard of media scholars.

It is only to be expected: it's the professional deformation of the specialists. Media Studies suffers from the definitional limitation that it calls itself — *Media Studies*. It is also to be expected that we overestimate the import of this historical moment, as we live it ourselves. And when the societal relevance of Media Studies is challenged, which happens not infrequently, we can now invoke the stupendous, revolutionary rise of the internet. This knee-jerk reflex has become our strategic ritual. The media industries need young people proficient in digital production. Lucky for us.

Additionally, our focus on the internet reveals who we are: part of the affluent, wired, *Wired*-reading elites. Our illusions about the importance of the internet are akin to our illusions about Trump never possibly getting elected. With our myopic focus on the internet, we like to think we are in the vanguard. But if we take a moment to look back over our shoulder, we will notice no one behind us. For instance, the widespread belief among scholars and other prominent observers that now with the internet we finally can all be our own journalist, editor, teacher, artist, and so on, suffers from the fatal flaw that there still are only 24 hours in the day. People, no doubt all critics and artists at heart, continue to have to go to work and raise their kids. Additionally, the belief of the liberating internet echoes (and solidifies) the neoliberal guise that choice and self-reliance are always better than no choice and “dependence” on others. Yet there are many areas of society where choice is a hassle, not to mention expensive: schools, utilities, to name a few. Had the majority of scholars consisted of, say, Latina single moms who used to work menial jobs, we perhaps would not have suffered such illusions.

### The Obligatory Conclusion

In a brilliant treatise on the many failures of internet research, Evgeny Morozov ironically exclaims: “Forget about learning about the world: let’s just learn something about the Internet! Now, that’s a trendy subject.” Much of the existing research is, indeed, dubiously framed. Take the ubiquitous issue of the “political implications of the Internet.” Apart from the fact that the opposite issue, how politics explains the internet is less often explicitly addressed, but potentially much more enlightening, Morozov notes that, “as virtually every one of our social activities is being digitized, it’s very arrogant of us to expect that, somehow, we would be able to figure out what the role of the Internet in all of this is”:

*But even in the context of a single country, it seems impossible to answer our initial question about the “political consequences of the Internet.” If, say, the Russian Internet is made of platforms, standards, user behaviors, and so on — and if we grant that both their individual shape and the form of their mutual entanglement are themselves the product of history, politics, economics, and culture — then we are essentially asking about the “political consequences of politics,” a tautology if there ever was one.*

We need to look at the world afresh in its totality and accept the possibility that the internet is hardly as important as we are making it out to be. If anyone should feel responsible for not exaggerating the importance of the internet or pinning unrealistic hopes upon it, it should be media scholars. We need to debunk the perceived primacy of the internet in this

neoliberal age. An ethnographic *People’s History of the Influence of the Internet* about “normal” people’s lives and the internet would probably do the trick. If we persist in our current ways, we do our students and the broader public a disservice. Media scholarship should be dedicated to dispelling myths about the media, not advancing them. A central myth is that what happens to and on the internet is so very important for the future of our societies.

But the internet is not the internet:

*The Internet was a heaping mass of ideologies, spoken and unspoken, that reflected the social values of its many creators. Some of these men believed in freedom of expression. Some of these men were afraid of the Russians. Some of these men believed in nothing but money. (Kobek 2016: 2003; emphasis in original)*

In short, if any field should take care to avoid internet-centrism, it is Media Studies. The world is burning. The internet has something to do with it, but not necessarily a lot. Let’s study the world to find out what is going on – without being afraid to, perhaps, conclude that the internet had little impact at all.

[Author drops the mic.]

### Bio

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