for he contrived, by an exquisite process, best known to himself, to transmute this heavy moral burden into the very substance of the imagination, to make it evaporate in the light and charming fumes of artistic production.

Powers was a writer who labored under his burden, groaning all the way. In spite of itself, this book of his letters is a cautionary tale. It suggests that Powers is not best seen as a Catholic writer, or a *New Yorker* writer, or a writer slain by the enemies of promise, or a writer thwarted in his search for suitable accommodations. He is an American vitalist, second string, alongside Nelson Algren, James Dickey, Ken Kesey, and James Salter. In a key way, though, he is quite unlike them. They—through aviation, outré sex, LSD, moonshine—chose the life over the work, attachment over detachment. Their zeal for extraliterary adventure kept them from the first team of postwar American writing, but it also kept them pointed outward, toward experience and society, and it gave them something to write *about*.

Powers chose the work. It seemed a prudent choice, even a holy one. But it starved the work and it imprisoned the writer. His story makes clear that writing is a worldly undertaking and that the writer who disdains the world is going to run into trouble. It makes clear that the writer who deals in the old ways has to stay steps ahead imaginatively, and that the writer who would keep clear of sex and violence, current affairs, and fashion—who disdains manners—risks missing the mystery.

And yet it's also strong evidence of what even the less fortunate among writers can accomplish. If you have to do things the hard way, making your work in the face of penury, social upheaval, writer's block, and a nagging sense of futility, you could do worse than J. F. Powers. You could do worse than to wind up (seven decades after you started out) with two novels and thirty stories in print and a stylish book of your letters besides: several thousand sentences, each beautifully formed. You could do worse than to wind up a mystery, a writer people are still trying to figure out. ■

NUMERICAL MADNESS

Critiques of a life online

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

Discussed in this essay:

To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism, by Evgeny Morozov. PublicAffairs. 432 pages. $28.99. publicaffairsbooks.com.
Taipei, by Tao Lin. Vintage. 256 pages. $14.95. knopfdoubleday.com.

It's a rare week when somebody doesn't have something sweeping to say about the Internet. It's making us smarter or it's making us dumber; it's making us nicer or it's making us meaner. It's hard to keep track of when it's disrupting one thing or having a chilling effect on another, but everybody can agree that whatever it's doing is definitely irreversible. To Evgeny Morozov, who has emerged as perhaps the most useful—wittingly and unwittingly—technological skeptic around, such "Internet-centrism" is just a new name for old messianic ways of thinking. In *To Save Everything, Click Here,* he goes about debunking two claims. The first is that there is such a thing as "an Internet" about which we ought to have opinions. The second, to which he devotes most of his energy, is the subclaim that "the Internet" is going to make everything better.

In Morozov's account, "Internet-centrism" is the belief that there is this thing called "the Internet" and that it has certain native characteristics and priorities—openness, say, or transparency—that we thwart at our own peril. This, he says, is wrong; what we call "the Internet" is merely a collection of tools made by various people on behalf of myriad organizations for manifold purposes—Twitter, he points out, has very little in common with Instapaper—and when we obscure that variety we make ourselves complicit in a lazy, dangerous pietistic fantasy. Appeals to the monolithic and ineluctable, as Morozov has learned from Dewey and Foucault, invariably hide some active party's power grab, and prevent us from confronting such "complex empirical matters" as "the politics of algorithm" or "the history of facial-recognition technologies." This is an important, necessary argument, and Morozov has done honorable work in making it.

The cheap McLuhanist belief that there are inviolable qualities of a medium, Morozov continues, provides the foundation for technological "solutionism." This is the idea that the increased efficiency, clarity, and order provided by technology via the Internet are going to deliver us from the problems politics has failed to solve. Morozov is happy to grant that technology can do a lot of super things. What he thinks the techno-utopians don't understand is that many of our fixes might prove more troublesome and expensive than they initially seem.

Take, for example, a "smart" trash can. Each time you open and close the lid, an embedded camera takes a picture of your refuse and posts the image to a social network. Consumers, motivated by shame, will be encouraged to recycle. This might minimize household waste in the short term, but at what cost? It could be used as political cover, to encourage consumers to focus on the relatively minor environmental problem of the household rather than the major problem of industry. It might, furthermore, train us on a certain incentive structure, and thus train us out of the broader sentiment of civic responsibility. Each chapter of Morozov's book applies this basic argument to another field: predictive policing, self-driving cars, et cetera. In each arena, politics—the idea of progress by wrangling—is abjured by "cyber-Whigs" in favor of engineering. If we can solve for efficiency (and thereby

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minimize friction in resource allocation, bring down informational costs, and properly align incentives), everything else will fall into place.

But as Morozov makes clear, this preoccupation with efficiency emphasizes means over ends. Or, more specifically, it confuses the means we have at our disposal for the ends that are so troublesome to determine. Take, for example, the "self-tracking" movement, which promotes the universal quantification of expenditure.

> Self-tracking can tell us how much energy our air-conditioning system consumes and might even tell us how well its demands match our goals, but it cannot comment on the desirability of leaving the air-conditioning on.

For that, we need the particular kind of proceduralism—messy, imperfect, inefficient in design—we call politics.

Morozov's favorite formulation of this means/end problem is in terms of two analytic modes: the narrative imagination versus the numerical imagination. The narrative imagination, a term Morozov borrows from the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, is the facility we have for telling ourselves, and one another, repeatable and coherent stories about how we got here and where we might now go. These are necessarily stories about ends—about the kinds of people we are and the kinds of communities we wish to live in. The numerical imagination, by contrast, considers the kinds of metrics we might keep in mind as we pursue our goals. As Morozov puts it, "Numeric imagination might tell us how to use the air conditioner more efficiently, but narrative imagination can tell us whether we should use it at all." As long as we retain both modes—as long as we balance political discussions of whether to use air conditioning with technological discussions of how best to use it—we'll be fine. The trouble is when we think the computational can do the work of the poetic.

Top to bottom: "Textbook," "What's the Jackanory," "The Social," and "A Photography Blog," photographs by Gabriela Herman from the series Bloggers

Morozov, not given to throat-clearing, states his book's premise up front:

> Silicon Valley's quest to fit us all into a digital straightjacket by promoting efficiency, transparency, certitude, and perfection—and, by extension, eliminating their evil twins of friction, opacity, ambiguity, and imperfection—will prove to be prohibitively expensive in the long run.

He goes on to say that "Sometimes, imperfect is good enough; sometimes, it's much better than perfect." The allusion to Donald Winnicott isn't incidental, for this marks an otherwise unannounced shift in Morozov's book from political economy to psychology.

> Ignorance can be dangerous, but so can omniscience: there is a reason why some colleges stick to need-blind admissions processes. Ambivalence can be counterproductive, but so can certitude: if all your friends really told you what they thought, you might never talk to them again.

It's all very well said, and *To Save Everything* has been greeted with nearly uniform critical response: Morozov is a brilliant man. His examples are often a little far-fetched, and he might have written a more

persuasive book had he more carefully distinguished between probable futures (self-driving cars) and long-shot ones (the elimination of crime). The problem with Morozov's book is with his rhetorical style—his paranoid contempt for his perceived enemies; his tendency to caricature their arguments; and his studied neglect of the contemporary thinkers who have anticipated and influenced him, and with whom he might make common cause.

But none of this is merely rhetorical. His book fails on its own moral terms. Nearly every attribute he identifies with the rise of the "numerical imagination" is characteristic of his own argumentative manner. He is certain and omniscient. He has no time for ambiguity or ambivalence. You are with him or you are against him. He might be read as exactly the sort of person we will all become if his direst predictions come true. He puts himself forward as the ultimate product of the Internet whose existence he so resolutely denies.

There is, of course, an Internet, if not in theory then very much in practice. Many of us spend our days in front of the screens on our desks or those in our pockets or handbags. One can be absolutely delighted by the ways in which the Internet brings together people of disparate backgrounds online, the ways it helps lonely and isolated and marginalized people feel less lonely and isolated and marginalized, and even more so the ways in which the Internet, by means of Meetups or Airbnb, brings people of disparate backgrounds together in person. But one can at the same time remark on the incontrovertible fact that a lot of interactions that once took place through complicated, communicatively rich channels now take place through simplified, communicatively poor ones, and that, furthermore, this communicative poverty is exacerbated by the rapid-feedback loops that otherwise give an impression of bounty.

In his collection of essays on face-to-face interaction, the sociologist Erving Goffman has a nice analysis of the strategies of deference and demeanor in a mental ward:

> If an individual is to act with proper demeanor and show proper deference, then it will be necessary for him to have areas of self-determination. He must have an expendable supply of the small indulgences which his society employs in its idiom of regard—such as cigarettes to give, chairs to proffer, food to provide, and so forth. He must have freedom of bodily movement so that it will be possible for him to assume a stance that conveys appropriate respect for others and appropriate demeanor on his own part; a patient strapped to a bed may find it impractical not to befoul himself, let alone stand in the presence of a lady. He must have a supply of appropriate clean clothing if he is to make the sort of appearance that is expected of a well demeaned person. To look seemly may require a tie, a belt, shoe laces, a mirror, and razor blades—all of which the authorities may deem unwise to give him. He must have access to the eating utensils which his society defines as appropriate ones for use, and may find that meat cannot be circumspectly eaten with a cardboard spoon.

I do not think it is saying anything overly general about the Internet to observe that the chief ways in which many of us relate to other people these days resemble the hobbled interactions of a mental ward. Many of the tools of deference and demeanor have become unavailable to us. There is a whole lot you can communicate with the rhythm and inflection of your voice, and with the gestural signs of a proffered cigarette, that you simply cannot communicate via text. (It seems as though at least once a week I have an interaction where somebody mentions how hard it is to get tone right in an email. I disagree. The problem is that it's hard to get tone right *in writing*.) The point is not that face-to-face interaction is any more honest or authentic than Internet interaction. It's that we've had a long time to establish the in-person social rituals that allow for nuance and range, and we haven't had nearly as much experience with screen-mediated culture.

Regardless of our suspicions that we might not be saying everything we mean, we are drawn to screen-mediated communication because it offers us a very appealing fantasy of control: all the things that make face-to-face interaction so rich and so potentially sustaining are also the things that make it exhausting. It requires poise, good sportsmanship, calculated

expressions of regard and disregard. When we text or email, we think we have the upper hand; we can't be compromised by what Goffman called the "expressive treacherousness" of an interaction on the phone, or, worse, in person. But as the psychologist Sherry Turkle has suggested, this control always has a cost.

Where a more sensitive thinker than Morozov might be inclined to survey the literature on the Internet and ask *why* we have this tendency to get all synoptic about a bunch of quasi-related tools, he gets rancorous. This seems poignant to me. After all, Morozov spends a lot of time using the tools of cramped exchange, in the character of @evgenymorozov. He sometimes tweets twenty or thirty times a day, and his Twitter persona is smug, irritable, venomous, and most of all needy. His self-promotion is clumsy and his aggression adolescent. He consistently avoids communicative complexity. In response to a mixed but thoughtful review, for example, which itself pointed out his arrogance, he tweeted that "these people are caught up in so much bullshit that they can no longer navigate their way through logic. sad but what can we do." This appeared about twenty minutes after he tweeted, "I guess I'll have to write a takedown of my own book, as the ones I've read so far are kind of shallow & miss most problematic areas."

The rhetoric of *To Save Everything* is of a piece. Morozov has almost exclusively primary-color feelings about other people. Of the two kinds of thinkers in the world, one side comprises such "highly original" people as Jane Jacobs, Ivan Illich, and Michael Oakeshott. These advocates of diversity, deliberation, and process—the varieties of inefficiency Morozov admires—are usually dead or academic. Most everybody else is worthy only of a contemptuous thumbs-down. Some of them are indeed techno-utopian boosters, but many of the writers he cites with disdain—Lawrence Lessig, Tim Wu, Jonathan Zittrain—are exactly the kinds of people he, by his own lights, ought to respect. When he does acknowledge a debt, he's tirelessly condescending about it. His book is sprinkled with gotcha [*sic*]s gleefully inserted into the quotations of opponents. (It is particularly unfortunate that he makes a number of grammatical and typographical errors of his own.)

It never seems to occur to Morozov that he himself is in the thrall of a particular kind of Internet logic. Facebook and Twitter, as Morozov points out, are obviously not "the Internet." They are tools. But Morozov, who frequently invokes the old axiom that if you're holding a hammer everything looks like a nail, ought to be the first person to allow that if you're using TweetDeck everything looks like an exchange that can be resolved with a RT or an unfollow or a 140-character snub. In other words, all the tools of the numerical, rather than the narrative, imagination.

One could reasonably say, of course, that "the Internet" has nothing to do with this. Intellectually imperious writers have presumably existed since the invention of writing. So it seems relevant here to note that Evgeny Morozov and @evgenymorozov do seem like very different selves. I went to Morozov's talk for the New York launch of *To Save Everything*, and it was among the best such events I've ever attended. He spoke, without notes and without needless repetition, for exactly thirty minutes. His performance had a low-key, spiky sangfroid and was delivered in an endearingly self-effacing deadpan. The best part of the evening came during the question-and-answer portion. "Forgive me if I'm not totally coherent," one audience member began, "but I've spent the last seventy-two hours straight reading Foucault." He paused. I don't know if he expected a knowing laugh from the crowd, but none was forthcoming; nobody in the room was willing to grant even a "ha" of solidarity. What the petitioner said hung nakedly in the room's fluorescence. As he fumbled for a way to save face, Morozov broke in. "Shall I answer you in French?" he asked, with an impish grin, and everybody laughed. It was an arrogant thing to say, to be sure, but it was offered with sincerity, and it presented a way to acknowledge the awkwardness of the situation and to smooth the way forward beyond it.

Perhaps only a novel—an inherently ambiguous form—can take up the psychological ramifications of a proliferating numerical imagination, and show us what we might lose not just politically but emotionally as well. The sort of person who hopes that, as Morozov puts it, "numbers might eventually reveal some deeper inner truth about who we really are" is a good description of Paul, the protagonist of Tao Lin's new novel, *Taipei*.

The scenes in *Taipei,* in which almost nothing ever happens, seem to take place in a mildly depressed real world between intervals of "looking at the internet." (Paul only rarely specifies which Internet tool he's using at any given time, which is part of the point; fans and enemies of Tao Lin know that he's energetically active, which is to say depressively active, on basically every single one of them.) Paul, like Tao Lin, is a writer with a few books behind him and a measure of online fame. Lin's preference for continuous quantification has earned his work the label "autistic realism," but it's just as plausible that the quantification has less to do with the spectrum than it does with just how much time he spends online. On almost any page we find Paul at a party among "sixty to eighty" friends, drinking his "third or fourth" drink, and observing women as far as "thirty feet away." Paul only ever goes out to social events "to find a girlfriend"—the kind of relationship everybody would readily agree is better in person. The women he meets are often women he knows about from the Internet, and invariably his in-person engagements with them result in a good deal of electronic communication.

The narration is mostly monotonic, but it is often very funny:

> After some indecision, briefly motionless, Paul turned around and asked if Kyle wanted to meet Traci. Kyle nodded and followed Paul outside the gallery, to a wide hallway, where six people, including Traci—described earlier by Kyle as "really hot," by Paul as "her blog gets a lot of hits"—shook hands with one another.

Often, these interactions are registered by their quantifiable traces. Some weeks after this party, we learn that

> In the library, that night, Paul discovered Gabby had defriended him on Facebook and was surprised that Kyle, his closest friend the past two years, except the nine months he was with Michelle, had also defriended him and that both had unfollowed him on Twitter.

It is no great surprise that Paul perceives his life as discontinuous—that is, as lacking the self-soothing of an engaged narrative imagination and the assistance of a supporting cast. "One seemed simply to be here, less an accumulation of moments than a single arrangement continuously gifted from some inaccessible future." He is alienated—his metaphor for most cities is lunar, and his metaphor for his imagination is a screen—as well as passive-aggressive. He is aware, at times dimly and at times with great acuteness, that his alienation has something to do with the numerical imagination. He admits that

> without education's season-backed, elaborately subdivided, continuous structure, traceable numerically backward almost to birth, connecting a life in that direction, he was becoming isolated and unexplainable as one of those mysterious phenomena, contained within informational boxes, in picture-heavy books on natural history, which he would've felt scared, as a child, if he was alone in a dark room, to think about for too long.

Paul often comments that he has been "working on things," or reassures himself that his weightlessness is okay because he's in an "interim period." Often these are put in quotation marks because, he goes on to reveal, he's quoting from an email or text message or Gchat, but often as not they're merely quoted, as though they're technical terms he isn't entirely familiar with.

As far as plot goes, Paul breaks up with two women, starts doing a huge amount of often contradictory drugs, goes on a book tour, embarks on an intimate relationship with Erin, a woman he seems to genuinely like, and impulsively marries her in Las Vegas. (These events, Lin presumes some readers will know, more or less describe the course of his relationship with the filmmaker Megan Boyle, from whom he is now divorced. They appear to re-

main close Internet friends.) Erin and Paul go to visit Paul's parents in Taipei, do ever larger amounts of drugs—which are described with increasing monotony, as though in direct disproportion to the outlandish amount of drugs they're doing—and make movies with their computers. If it sounds boring, it's because it often is, but it's also hard not to get trapped in its rhythmic lull the way one might while away a few hours on the Internet. Lin's great skill is to punctuate the narration with occasional moments of great lyricism, beauty, or pain.

> He was trying to remove Laura's clothing. He felt like he was trying to remove the surface of a glass bottle by pawing at it with oven mitts. He expressed confusion and Laura said "it's just a skirt … and tights" and stopped moving completely, it seemed, as Paul continued touching her strange outfit with hands that felt glossy and fingerless, suspecting at one point, with some sarcasm, that she was wearing a corset.

Paul is unable to observe the social niceties that make sustained and fluid personal exchanges—the kind that might lead to intimacy—possible: he asks hostile, intrusive, unrelenting questions about trivial matters, falls asleep on couches at gatherings, and, in one particularly cringey scene, robotically interrupts a dance party by putting on the Smashing Pumpkins' "Today." When he does make a personal connection, he retreats to, and inevitably founders in, the shoals of electronic communication. As one short relationship fades, Laura emails that "she felt like she missed him" before saying she'll see him tomorrow. "He was aware of not acknowledging her line about missing him in his response, which included a short list of restaurants he liked." It's not that email makes this kind of snub possible, it's that email makes this kind of snub both one-dimensional and obscure. Electronic communication only ever reneges on its promise of clarity in simplicity.

There are certain things that the Internet is very good for, but as @evgenymorozov has discovered, the ceremonial exchange of complex mutual recognition is not one of them. The numerical imagination is preoccupied with numbers of followers and RTs and favorites but rarely sees meaningful satisfaction from them.

If Morozov doesn't seem to understand the ways in which @evgenymorozov undermines his jeremiad, Tao Lin uses his Internet presence—at @tao_lin on Twitter and the hilariously unwieldy and self-denying @mtgjdfjdfgukkhddtyhcffghhvdfyg on Instagram—as a way to expand on and contextualize his novel. Lin knows, for this was by design, that his fiction will always be read against his online persona, which itself is a performative project that engages directly with these difficulties of online interaction. A typical set piece proceeds as follows: Somebody tweets a link to a negative review of *Taipei* on a literary blog. @tao_lin responds with something both inane and insulting, something like "u sick asshole." This is more or less the message of most of @evgenymorozov's analogous tweets—Goffman calls them "naked little spasms of the self"—but @tao_lin understands that his move is a basic and ashamed unit of mere aggression. Then @mtgjdfjdfgukkhddtyhcffghhvdfyg posts a screenshot of the Twitter exchange on Instagram, with a caption asking his followers to weigh in on whether he ought to be having exchanges like this. Responses will vary. The effect is a continual, playful assault on the means by which a person might achieve the ends of dignity and self-worth. (@tao_lin, unlike @evgenymorozov, admits Internet shame: he is known for deleting tweets.)

Numerical madness seems to be Paul's fate, which is why it comes as a great relief to the reader when he gets together with Erin. The first time they have sex he can't quite escape his Internet-consciousness.

> Erin's eyes, whenever Paul looked, seemed to be tightly closed, which seemed like "not a good sign," as he'd read on her blog—or somewhere—that she liked sex with "a lot of eye contact."

The next day, however, Paul texts her to ask if she wants to come back from Baltimore, where she lives, to join him in New York for an art event in two days. He quickly texts

again to say he understands if she doesn't want to. When Erin texts back with alacrity, Paul, touchingly, "viewed himself as being . . . in a stable situation of mutual, increasing attraction."

Paul begins to understand that one of the counterintuitive things about life is that the more securely you can tolerate unpredictability, the more spontaneously yourself you can afford to be; the jagged forays of an Internet life promise that efflorescence but only promote the paralysis of fed-back awareness. Paul and Erin have a hard time learning to face each other. Neither is prepared to put in the effort required, and they begin to resent and hurt each other; their time in Taipei, while mostly eventless, is also very painful.

It's not clear exactly where this is going. It often seems likely to spin in perpetual anomie. But it turns out, by the end, that there's something about Erin that Paul wants to draw himself out for. The final scene sees him descending into a bad mushroom trip. He worries he might be dead. He says he feels self-conscious and goes into the bathroom. After some time he leaves the bathroom and at first is afraid of Erin, whose movements seem, "like with insects or large predators, unpredictable and dangerous." But Erin has seen him "and, after a pause, distracted by her attention, he reciprocate[s] her approach." They hug, and a moment later he is surprised to hear himself say he is "'grateful to be alive.'" *Taipei* finally reads like a moving parody of an addiction memoir, one more tale of rock bottom and recovery—though in this case it's addiction not to drugs but to the illusion of the quantifiable, controlled online life.

Lin goes out of his way to suggest, at times, that his book is more documentary than fiction. But just as we are settling into that interpretation, he'll do something—like have one character read as memoir what we've already read as fiction—that reminds us this is a novel. It's no wonder that the novel, the form that tolerates the greatest inefficiency and disorder, has provided us a method of Internet criticism that's not itself Internet-disfigured.

It's not that Morozov doesn't try, at times, to do this. One gets the sense that he worries about the limitations of @evgenymorozov. Sometimes he tries to communicate expansively. He starts his book in a very peculiar and arresting way:

> Have you ever peeked inside a friend's trash can? I have. And even though I've never found anything worth reporting—not to the KGB, anyway—I've always felt guilty about my insatiable curiosity. Trash, like one's sex life or temporary eating disorder, is a private affair par excellence; the less said about it, the better.

These first few lines present a complicated narrator. He's willing to be unlikable, and he doesn't stand on ceremony. He sees himself, perhaps unreliably, as someone with a sense of humor. He's indecorous enough to imply that he might have had a "temporary" eating disorder. There's an attempt at richness here, an attempt at the kinds of communicative indirection that allow for obliquity and inconsistency. But he soon falls back on @evgenymorozov, whose Twitter stream can, in turn, be read as a childish protest against the constraints of the medium. Where @tao_lin reacts to the emotional strictures of an online life with anhedonia or absurdism, @evgenymorozov goes overboard in his attempt to reintroduce value judgments into a world characterized by a fetish for efficiency.

Although, then again, who knows for sure? Morozov has certainly been open in telling all his friends what he thinks of them, and for all I know they haven't stopped talking to him. I have no accurate idea what Tao Lin is like in real life. I've met him a few times, and he never remembers me. At a recent event of his at a bookstore in New York City, I asked him, during the question-and-answer session, to explain his Instagram handle. He didn't seem to think it was a stupid question, but he thought the answer was obvious. "It's because @taolin and @tao_lin were both taken. Do you know how I might get them back?" ■