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von Andrian Kreye

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The World Is Not Enough – How To Reinvent The Internet

An original essay by Evgeny Morozov for the Feuilleton of the Sueddeutsche Zeitung

As the world continues to digest the multiple abuses of American power unveiled by Edward Snowden, some have expressed concerns that the Internet might soon fall victim to “Balkanization.” The fear here is that, as national governments rush to limit their reliance on American communications infrastructure – which the NSA has no problem monitoring – they would also inadvertently fracture the global unity of the network, imposing artificial limitations and barriers that can cripple its future development and considerably complicate connections between users in different countries.

National email services, national search engines, national cable infrastructure, the Schengen “cloud”: the possibilities for national (and pan-European) self-reliance are many. From a planet with one global Internet, run on common interoperable standards, we might be heading to a hundred local Minitels, unable to interconnect with each other.

Another fear, particularly pertinent in the context of regimes in China, Russia or Iran, is that Snowden's revelations would be used to push for a new set of aggressive national controls over digital infrastructure – an agenda that these governments, troubled by what they learned from the Arab Spring, have already been pursuing for several years. These governments, keen to defend their “information sovereignty,” summarily dismiss concerns over Balkanization as irrelevant: if national governments still have a say in limiting the movements of people and goods, why shouldn't they have a say in limiting the movement of information?

No one has been louder in voicing concerns over the prospect of Balkanization than American technology companies. For what Snowden has revealed is that a network that we take to be truly global is also thoroughly American. At the same time, it has been large European telecoms – with their traditional cozy relationship with the state – that have been championing various initiatives that aim at doing everything that is already done on American servers – but, this time, in Europe. For these European firms, Snowden represents a missed chance to catch up with Silicon Valley, using politics as a lever to get ahead of the Americans.

Under these circumstances, it's understandable that anyone concerned with the future of global technology policy – and especially on the pan-European level – is in deep despair. To leave things as they stand now would be to acquiesce to NSA surveillance and accept the risk that the further integration of every single device and previously dumb object onto a smart network – currently marketed under the innocent label of “Internet of Things” – would make ubiquitous surveillance even easier. Now that Google has acquired Nest, the manufacturer of smart objects for the home, NSA might access your bedroom as easily it can currently access your inbox.

The other option is as depressing. To support the unimaginative Balkanization agenda that is being spearheaded by European technology incumbents – who, surrounded by armies of Brussels-based lobbyists,

profit from the severe lack of coherence and imagination in EU-wide technology policy – is to support an option that would still leave the communications infrastructure open to national security services (even if it won't be as easy for NSA to listen in) while impeding many non-commercial uses of the same platforms. The recent developments in France, where, with the world's attention fixed on the NSA, the government quietly pushed for draconian surveillance legislation are a case in point.

But we should not despair. The way forward is to recover and nurture a different dimension to the much-feared Balkanization. So yes, there's a third way. Balkanization – a concept hijacked by technology firms on both sides of the Atlantic to push for their own business agendas – can also mean something very different and more upbeat: decentralization of information infrastructure combined with the erection of a few occasional barriers to what would otherwise be perfectly frictionless movement of data. Silicon Valley hates friction – in the 1990s Bill Gates sang gospels to “frictionless capitalism” and, more recently, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg lauded “frictionless sharing” – but should we not inquire as to how much frictionlessness a democratic system can withhold?

Of course, due to the bloody history of horrific conflicts in the Balkans, the very label infuses us with prejudice. But there's no harm in imagining a technological future different from our technological present, for the present is so utterly pathetic. What American companies are quick to dismiss as Balkanization is also a way to think our way out of the severe constraints on our imagination that have been imposed as we began to treat the “Internet” – a conglomeration of diverse services, practices, and protocols – as the only possible solution to our communication problems. But isn't it naïve to believe, as we have done for two decades, that “the Internet” – which here means nothing but always-private, always-commercial touted by Silicon Valley – is the panacea to all of our ills?

It's time for us to remember that civic and commercial innovation can thrive on the local level as well – not just globally. The argument against Balkanization, made by US-based technology giants, has always relied on some perverse notion and at times fundamentalist notion of utopian cosmopolitanism: if only we are allow maximum interconnection, intercultural contacts will get established, people in Mali will discover people in Montana, everyone will suddenly care about African warlords like Joseph Kony, and so on. Yet, perhaps, it's time to question whether the pursuit of this cosmopolitan agenda has served us well.

We wanted to build a global village – only to end up with a global panopticon instead. There's little evidence that people in Montana are any more concerned about Mali than two decades ago. At the same time, the cosmopolitan impulse – strategically played up by Silicon Valley in seemingly noble initiatives like Internet.org (a Facebook-led effort to get the remaining five billion people connected) has stopped us from experimenting with communication models that, while possibly less integrated at the global level, would promote different values locally.

The hard truth is that the fear of Balkanization is a bogeyman invented by Silicon Valley – the companies that have most to lose from any strategic reconfiguration of the current technological environment – in order to stave off any efforts, both intellectual and political, to set up a different communication infrastructure. Should we be content with the chance to contact anyone we want in Uganda – a chance that most of us, for whatever reasons, currently leave not pursue – if that demands that we abandon any say over national technology policy?

If we were to start from scratch, we can imagine an entirely different reality. Just to take one example: Why aren't we doing anything to promote decentralized, secure and portable digital identities that could be used to conduct business with both commercial and state institutions? If we do nothing and let “the Internet” take its course, this service will be provided by Facebook and Google, through its megalomaniac service, Google

Plus. It's possible that the digital identity system used in Germany would end up being different from the one used in Brazil – here Facebook and Google have the advantage of standardization and homogeneity – but the civic advantages of such local systems, decoupled from the commercial logics driving large technology companies, might outweigh the costs.

What Snowden has revealed are not just gaps in our laws – he has also showed us huge gaps in our imagination, which is getting atrophied as we treat our current technological configurations as the only – perhaps, even inevitable – way to run things. If Balkanization is the way to get us out of this intellectual hibernation, there's no harm in supporting it – as long as we don't end up with the same corporate overlords, only now brandishing European flags.

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