

***Confronting the Internet's Dark Side: Moral and Social Responsibility on the Free Highway*, by Raphael Cohen-Almagor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 406 pp. ISBN: 978-1107105591**

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Raphael Cohen-Almagor's book, *Confronting the Internet's Dark Side: Moral and Social Responsibility on the Free Highway*, seeks to examine "moral and social responsibility on the internet" (11). Cohen-Almagor focuses on four problems online—terrorism, cyberbullying, child porn, and hate speech—as antisocial forms of internet expression. The book examines each problem to identify the morally responsible actors. The goal itself is a contribution as he names an important set of problems that merit a general, public discussion.

Chapters one through three serve as background. Chapter one offers a history of the internet, whereas chapter two explains the technological foundation. These two chapters, while interesting, are not necessary to understand the arguments of the book. In fact, the nuances of chapter two—such as the dual use of using proxy servers and Tor by journalists, law enforcement, and the public to circumvent authoritarian regimes—are ignored later on in the book in a discussion of child pornography and possible solutions. Silkroad and Bitcoin, perhaps the "Napster" of Internet 2.0, are not mentioned. Chapter three offers the theoretical foundation used in the book including Cohen-Almagor's version of moral and social responsibility and the concepts of *democratic catch* and *moral panics*.

The rest of the book (including chapters four through nine) examines each actor on the internet—contributor, reader, "publisher" (web hoster) and the state—and explores how each has a significant responsibility to ensure justice and minimize harm to others. Chapter four focuses on the responsibility of "contributors" or *Netizens* who add content online and uses the cases of cyberbullying we hear so much about. Chapter five focuses on the responsibility of readers of content online and uses mass shooters who had posted online threats first. Chapters six and seven focus on the responsibility of internet service providers (ISPs) and web hosting services (WHSs). Finally, chapters eight and nine turn to public policy and the responsibility of the state, including national and international organizations, to regulate online activities including child pornography and terrorism.

It should be noted from the outset that the scope of this book is purposefully narrow. Cohen-Almagor does not believe his assumptions, arguments, or prescriptions apply to nondemocratic societies such as citizens in the Middle East, Africa, and China (this may work out fine for them as we will discuss shortly). Cohen-Almagor chooses to focus on "western liberal democracies" that respect autonomy and variety (11). Specifically, the book focuses on the US, Canada, UK, France, and Israel. Cohen-Almagor does believe in the existence of universal values but believes such values do not underlie all societies. Cohen-Almagor's analysis and eventual solutions are intended solely for the western democracies, which is ironic since the largest growth

in internet penetration noted in chapter two over roughly the last fifteen years is in Africa (6,498%), Asia (1,112%), and the Middle East (3,303%).

The book makes contributions both practically and theoretically. Practically, it organizes issues on the internet by the possible actor who should be responsible. This new framing of known problems such as cyberbullying and mass shootings allows us to examine who contributes to these problems and who may have the power to make a difference. In particular, the mere inclusion of web hosting services, who do not make content but influence how we take in content in the online marketplace, highlights how these companies have “discretion regarding whether their services are open to all or limited in one way or another” (155). Cohen-Almagor’s treatment of WHS positions suggests that these companies are similar to bookstores or publishers—and rightly so.

Cohen-Almagor proposes two theoretical contributions. First, his “Promotion Approach” states that firms should make judgments regarding with whom they do business and then take steps to monitor appropriate online content. For Cohen-Almagor, this means that WHSs should take responsibility for the content they host. Specifically, Cohen-Almagor argues that ISPs and WHSs “should adopt a proactive stance in combating antisocial and violent content. They cannot be neutral towards such a phenomenon” (177). While not included in the book, firms do take responsibility for what they host, such as Amazon’s web hosting policy and Wikileaks’ process of redacting sensitive content, as two of many examples. Facebook has been offering a mechanism to report inappropriate content given the rise in cyber bullying. Companies (and governments) work with perhaps the most well known scholar on hate crimes in cyberspace and online harassment, Professor Danielle Citron at the University of Maryland, to understand their contribution to crimes online.

Second, the book offers Cohen-Almagor’s concept of the “democratic catch” on which he has written elsewhere. The democratic catch is that democratic societies recognize the value of principles such as liberty, tolerance, pluralism, participation, and representation. But, he argues, these principles have boundaries and the exercise of certain rights, such as free expression, must not undermine foundations of democracy. This is the “catch” for Cohen-Almagor and he believes some societies, including the United States, have not embraced it. Cohen-Almagor says “American society has been willing to pay a substantial price for allowing hatemongers to spread their racist ideology on the streets as well as on the internet” and then rails against liberals and their fascination with free speech (60-61). Cohen-Almagor appears particularly concerned that “blanket statements expressing hatred towards certain groups are given free sway, even if individual members of such groups are put at risk” (4). While never mentioned, one is reminded of the Gamergate conflict where prominent female gamers and reporters were stalked and threatened online; Gamergate, and the backlash against companies who advertise on blogs of those a part of Gamergate, provides a good example for how difficult these issues are.

Yet, it remains unclear who Cohen-Almagor is arguing against. Cohen-Almagor argues that “liberty and tolerance are not prescriptions for lawlessness and violent

anarchy” (59) but only a very small minority argue for violent anarchy (and none are reading this book). Cohen-Almagor argues against “tolerating the intolerant” and against “harming of the more vulnerable people in society such as women and children” and against “limitless liberty” (59). Who actually argues for unfettered behavior such as “limitless liberty” is unstated. Both liberals and libertarians are painted with a broad brush as he sees neither as advocating for firms to take moral responsibility. But both do. He argues against libertarians whom he claims advocate “against IPS and WHSs to make moral calls” (174).

The examples are dated and recent dual use technology such as the Tor Project, Bitcoin, or Silkroad are either not mentioned or only in the technology background in chapter two. This is a shortcoming of the book as these examples make the implementation of Cohen-Almagor’s solution appear naïve. Cohen-Almagor wants certain forms of speech currently protected under First Amendment protections to be “restricted Net areas where you must register to obtain access” (159). Tor, proxy servers, and anonymous browsing and purchasing online (through means such as Bitcoin) render such solutions practically infeasible.

The attitude can sound nostalgic for a version of the world before the internet. According to the text, revenge porn is a concern especially among those “who change partners.” But many cases of online harassment and revenge porn are not targeting women who “change partners” but are from Peeping Toms who steal images of randomly targeted women or women who are merely vocal. One might rightly wonder why the victim descriptor “who change partners” is germane to a discussion of online harassment. Similarly, studies from 2006 on cyberbullying and 2004 on violent video games contain dated generalizations about games “causing” violence. The example of Yahoo! as an “internet-separatist” who wishes “to determine its own rules and regulations worldwide, notwithstanding national laws and morals” (231) is from over a decade ago. The company has evolved as their services are used worldwide similar to all internet companies.

Cohen-Almagor argues that online is fundamentally different in how relationships are formed, trust is operationalized, and accountability is assigned. Cohen-Almagor argues that net users “reveal intimate details” yet “do not aim to establish close, trusting relationships” (92-93). He sees the nature of friendships as changing. Yet, marginalized groups find kindred spirits online. Transgendered teens find options, gay young adults find support, rape victims find fellow travelers (and, sometimes, a vigilante group to go after their rapists online). Quite famously, a member from the Westboro Baptist Church—famous for picketing military funerals to protest gay rights—engaged people online and eventually left her sect.

Such details are interesting. The dual use of many internet technologies, the many actors sharing responsibility, and the questionable nexus of decision and harm all make the details important. Yet such nuances are not within the scope of this book. As Cohen-Almagor summarizes, “I believe that people are able to discern between good and evil. We can apply common sense and distinguish between that which is objectively right and that which is objectively wrong... We think that as an objective matter—a matter of who things actually are—that terrorism is manifestly wrong and immoral” (189). Yet, identifying terrorists is not as obvious (or “objective”) as

Cohen-Armagor's claim. The United States, the object of much of Cohen-Almagor's focus, has a problem of domestic terrorism that far exceeds the terroristic threats mentioned. Bombings of women's health clinics and black churches are the concern of US federal and state law enforcement. In fact, Martin Luther King, Jr. was placed on a list of domestic terror suspects after his famous "I have a dream" speech. Even "terrorism" is ambiguous. Such nuances and interesting cases should be the foundation of a book on moral responsibility and the internet rather than excluded.