A Review of *Twitter and Tear Gas*

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Abstract

Zeynep Tufekci's book *Twitter and Tear Gas* (Yale University Press; 2017) speaks to high-profile, anti-authoritarian networked protests. She engages with street protests and online movements to bring new perspectives and dialogues on the need for reconfiguration of digitally networked online spaces, and the trajectories of these social movements online. Her work contributes to scholarship in digital activism, and digital humanities in the context of networked movements.

Introduction

Zeynep Tufekci's book *Twitter and Tear Gas*, even within its title, attempts a relativization and comparison of high profile, horizontalist, and anti-authoritarian street protests with its integration of a "reconfigured public sphere that now incorporates digital technologies as well" [Tufekci 2017, x]. Her study eloquently engages with street protest movements like the Encuentro Zapatista, Podemos in Spain, Occupy Wall Street in Washington, Gezi Park in Turkey, and the Arab Spring in Egypt, and functions to systematically enable newer perspectives and dialogues on the need for a reconfiguration of digitally networked online spaces and the trajectories of social movements online.

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Positionality

As a social scientist, activist, programmer and faculty member in the Sociology Department at the University of North Carolina, Tufekci is uniquely positioned to underscore the metamorphosis that digital affordances have enabled in social mechanisms of protest. As a scholar of social movements and surveillance, Tufekci's work explores digital protest at the interstices of technology, society, effects of big data on politics and the public sphere. With her background in Computer Science, she is able to offer a counter-discourse to Silicon Valley's techno-utopianism, and her work disrupts the view that social media and tech companies have built over the years – that they are neutral, passive or even positive platforms affecting change in society. At this juncture, she locates the rise of Facebook, Twitter, and Google in relation to contemporary social movements. Her research could potentially be considered a repository of protest movements across the globe, and a comparativist analysis could engender the strengths they could draw from each other. Owing to versatility of her own disciplines, her research can be made available to a wide range of audiences and can function as a textbook or an academic resource within the university and beyond.

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Attention over Information

In Twitter and Tear Gas, Tufekci argues for both strengths and weaknesses; affordances and constraints of social media in organized digital protests, as she quotes historian Melvin Kranzberg from 1985, "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral" [Tufekci 2017, 263]. Social media movements, in short, can both empower and keep protests from attaining their capacities. Her work speaks volumes on the technological affordances that accompany modern protest cultures to accomplish a "coming together" of a large networked public in the overthrow of anti-authoritarian institutions and power structures. In tandem, Tufekci contends a fundamental fragility of leaderless networked movements that function ad hoc, providing flexibility to anyone who wishes to join and their debilitating lack of organization, authority and

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negotiation, when required. The ability to grow rapidly encompasses a lack of organization, a phenomenon she terms "tactical freeze" or an inability to enable tactical maneuvering. Moreover, as a techno-sociologist, Tufekci aptly identifies new media challenges of attention over information and new non-traditional forms of gatekeeping. According to the author, the new networked public sphere enables the amplification and abundance of false and unverified information [Tufekci 2017, 39] to "distract the audience, dilute attention, and sow fear and doubt in their minds" [Tufekci 2017, 228–229]. Tufekci highlights "the importance of attention as a key resource for social media movements," and underscores how "Facebook, Google and Twitter monetize attention in ways that may or may not be conducive to the success of protest movements online" [Tufekci 2017, 270]. In short, our move to digital technologies has enabled a trend where attention is manufactured as part of an emerging economy, and social media choreographs it as a tool to control and manipulate the masses. The book deftly maneuvers between the success of attention building in online activism and its challenges in the form of algorithmic control through bully bots and censorship by denial of attention, implemented by governments or private companies that seek to distract and exhaust both user and participant from partaking in the movement.

Social Media Platforms

Pragmatically, Tufekci explores the role of policies of larger social media platforms like Facebook, Google and Twitter that contribute aptly to the discussion on the softer biopolitics of algorithmic control. For example, Facebook's real name policy that effectively disrupts protester experience and Twitter's mention policy that generates attention across the platform are two mechanisms of algorithmic ebb and flow that create and disrupt success of protest movements online. Furthermore, protests, here, are an example of a signal that corresponds to one of several underlying capacities: narrative, disruptive and electoral capacities that are, in essence, muscles that need to be always prepared, and will enable a movement to scale enough to fight anti-authoritarian institutions.

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The non-chronological order of the discussions of power and fragility of protest movements online unnerves and oftentimes exhausts the reader. Nevertheless, there remains an effective freshness to the argument of technological non-neutrality that Tufekci constructs. She plays to her strengths as both a social scientist and ethnographer engaged in protest fieldwork across the world, and a programmer who studies algorithmic affordances, in the construction of a dialogue surrounding both online and offline protests.

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At the Intersection of Social Justice and Digital Humanities

Tufekci's project undertakes a broad investigation of digital activism, uncovers key players that influence the relationship between technology and contemporary social protest, and reflects on the power of attention over information in the age of New Media. Her work reconceptualizes social media movements in a new light, and applies rigorous empirical social science research to demonstrate the future of protest in digital media. She connects her discourse at the intersection of social justice, digital activism, and Digital Humanities. Although social science research in activism and Digital Humanities carries an important distinction, Digital Humanities scholar Roopika Risam argues that *Digital Humanities methods can be effective tools for calling attention to, and enabling social activism, particularly for marginalized communities* [Bagger 2018]. According to Risam, "Digital Humanities makes activism possible, offering hope for re-appropriating knowledge production" [Bagger 2018]. Digital humanists are poised to contribute to studies of social media activism through research, teaching, and community outreach and engagement. Digital Humanities envisions social media as a positive tool for transformative social change in digital activism, and for highlighting the scope and content of a humanistic inquiry. Although Tufekci's *Twitter and Tear Gas* lacks the humanistic perspective in its study of protest movements online that other scholars in Digital Humanities like Elizabeth Losh [Losh 2014], Moya Bailey, Sarah Jackson, Brooke Foucault Welles [Bailey et al. 2019] [Bailey et al. 2020], and Nishant Shah [Shah et al. 2015] tackle, it successfully builds a counter-narrative to techno-utopianism and left-leaning anti-authoritarianism in an effort to reframe knowledge production in the Humanities. Tufekci, in essence, grapples with critical questions in Digital Humanities about who creates, engages with, and controls digital spaces. This book is in a constant flux between the strengths and weaknesses of functioning and navigating within media spaces. It is an invaluable resource for anyone interested in how social activism constructs itself online and a must-read for all that have scholarly aims in the field of digital activism.

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Works Cited

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