

## **The More-Than-Human Framework, social media and the 2011 global protests**

This essay explores how the More-Than-Human framework could be used to analyse the growth of social media and the role this played in the 2011 global protests.

Much of the existing literature on this topic explores the development of social media, proliferation of smartphones and the rise of the networked individual through a more traditional humanist perspective – evaluating the impact of these phenomena with humanity as the central agent, neglecting the capacity of this non-human object to affect change in the human subject.

A More-Than-Human framework affords the opportunity to explore the relationship between social media and the 2011 global processes within a broad pool of shared agencies, and the impact this has had on organisation, power and human behaviour.

This essay will first define the More-Than-Human framework, then give a brief overview of social media and the 2011 global protests, before a final discussion regarding the application of this framework to this issue.

### **The More-Than-Human framework**

Much classical sociological research is grounded in humanism. As the name implies, this approach places human beings as the core subject at the centre of investigation; all actions and processes are evaluated according to their impact on humanity. Humanist philosophers adhere to the Cartesian distinction between agencies of observation (subjects - humans) and the observed (objects - all other matter). In this view, objects are innately passive, without agency and only capable of deriving meaning through that ascribed to them by humans, who are uniquely able to ascribe meaning, affect and comprehend the world.

New Materialist thinkers developed the More-Than-Human framework as a challenge to this anthropocentric stance. Social theorists applying this framework critique humanism on two primary accounts: firstly, that the central definition of 'human' is limited to an able-bodied straight white male in the West; secondly, that the approach presupposes that the human is sole master of their (usually 'his') domain and, as such, denies agency to non-human lifeforms and objects.

This new approach expands the boundaries of this conventional anthropocentric perspective to account for a range of non-human agents, such as plants, animals, objects, technologies and processes. Matter has a broad definition in this sense, and can be organic, synthetic, or even an assemblage of bodies and ideas. Social theorists imbue a shared agency onto these entities, considering them to be active participants in society which are capable, to varying degrees, of both affecting and being affected by human actions. According to this framework, the nature of agency itself is redefined into what Bennett terms 'distributive agency' which 'does not posit a subject as the root cause of an effect' (2010, p.31). There remains scope for intentionality within this definition of agency, but Bennett places within the web of interactions and intra-actions, a 'swarm of vitalities' (ibid, p.32) which ultimately guide outcomes.

Central to this distributive agency is the notion of 'thing power', which Bennet describes as 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce affects dramatic and subtle' (ibid, p.6). Material has a vitality, and human habits and relations are constantly shaped by the materials around them exerting 'thing power' in any given instance – such as in litter continuing to exist once discarded, or physical evidence becoming an actant in a trial.

Further to this, through her theory of Agential Realism, Barad asserts that phenomena emerge through relationships between entities. She reworks the traditional notion of causality, putting forward the notion that agencies don't exist as individual elements, but are 'only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement' (2007, p.33). Agency is, in this sense, is developed and exercised in the relationships between human and non-human actors, through the process of 'intra-action', which is described as 'the mutual constitution of entangled agencies.' (ibid). This is distinct to the more conventional 'interaction', which refers to relations between two entities which exercise their own agency. Agency in this New Materialist sense is only realised through these relationships, no entity has its own unique agency.

This work represented a departure from Actor Network Theory (ANT), which suggests that objects and phenomena are formed through the assemblages of humans and non-humans. The work is influenced by the hard-sciences, particularly the quantum mechanics, the work of Nils Bohr and the 'Copenhagen interpretation' which asserts that, at a quantum level, the act of observation affects the phenomena it seeks to study (ibid, p.68). Barad extends this to reassess the duality between matter and meaning.

Finally, whereas humanist philosophy is grounded in an ontology in which human beings sit atop an innate hierarchy which they dominate, More-Than-Human theorists adopt a concept of a flat ontology. In a flat ontology no one agent and entity, such as humans, groups, objects and environments, takes precedence over others, all are considered to be equally valid and real, and as such interact and co-constitute each other.

This ontological stance has two important implications for the human and non-human. Firstly, from an ecological perspective, plants, animals and other organic matter are afforded the same importance as humanity, 'humans are always in composition with nonhumanity, never outside of a sticky web of connections or an ecology' (Bennett 2004, 365). Secondly, as this form of materialism posits that all agents are equal, it follows that all humans are afforded equal ontological legitimacy and as such, there exists 'a kind of safety net for those humans who are... routinely made to suffer because they do not conform to a particular model of personhood.' (Bennet, 2010, p.13).

### **The growth of social media and the 2011 global protests**

In December 2011 Time Magazine named 'the Protestor' as the winner of their prestigious 'Person of the Year' award (Andersen, 2011). This came at the close of a turbulent twelve months in global politics, in which a wave of protest swept through much of the world, challenging financial orthodoxies in Western nations, and leading to revolution in some Arab states.

The 2011 global protests began in Tunisia with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in response to the harassment and humiliation inflicted on him by a municipal official. This brave act would become a catalyst for the Tunisian Revolution, which came in January 2011, and instigated the wider Arab Spring (Mason, 2013). During the months that followed subsequent protests emerged across a range of different contexts in a range of different states, including Tahrir Square in Egypt, the Indignados, or 15-M movement in Spain, and Occupy Wall Street in New York (ibid).

These protests all occurred within their own contexts and were motivated by unique factors – Egyptians were protesting against the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak, the 15-M movement against austerity and high rates of youth unemployment, whereas Occupy Wall Street stood against powerful financial interests in the US, and has otherwise been characterised as ‘the first major reaction to 30 years of class warfare’ (Gerbaudo, 2012)(Chomsky, 2012, p.9). There were interesting commonalities which connected the different movements. Firstly, in their use of occupational imagery in the generation of both a physical and a digital place – each of the movements listed established a physical base as a symbolic reclamation of public space in Tahrir Square, the Puerto del Sol and Zucotti Park, respectively. Secondly, each successive protest was inspired by those that preceded it – to the extent that the initial Adbusters post which instigated the Occupy protests requested that a ‘Tahrir moment’. Finally, these movements were enabled and sustained through engagement with social media, and the broader network, in a way that was unprecedented at the time.

The wide proliferation of the smart phone in the years immediately preceding 2011 fostered the development of what Castells (2012) terms ‘mobile networked individuals’, who have the capacity to capture events as they unfold and share them with the world in an instant. He asserts that social media has expanded both the ‘space of place’ and the ‘space of flows’ – the former refers to the capacity networked individuals to transmit and thus extend the reach of their physical environment, while the latter refers to the information and deliberation channels. Mason describes these protests as being ‘planned on Facebook, organised on Twitter and broadcast on YouTube’ (2013, p.13), for Castells, the 15-M movement ‘demonstrated social media’s ability to bypass a total media blackout’. (2012, p.142).

A 2013 study by Christian Fuchs indicated that the recruitment role of social media could have been overestimated by those reporting on the movement. In a survey of members of Occupy, 40% reported being directly ‘recruited’ by either Facebook or Twitter, though 80% believed that the tactics of the movement and its social media were inherently intertwined.

### **More-Than-Human framework and the growth of social media and the 2011 global protests**

Applying the more-than-human framework to the issue of the growth of social media and the 2011 global protests would firstly allow for a considered assessment of the different entities which held degrees of agency in producing these movements. This could start with an analysis of the advent of the networked individual and the impact that social media has had on affecting changes in patterns of human political organisation and communication, and could then expand to consider other non-human factors which enabled these protests to occur, such as the built environment, technological capacity and environmental factors.

The power of both social media and the internet more broadly in becoming a genuine affective agent in these contexts was plain to see, the organisation and broadcast power was such that the Egyptian government saw fit to shut down the country's internet in the midst of the revolution, to attempt to curb the perceived power of this tool.

This would also allow for a comparative analysis which account for all contextual factors and human and non-human objects which had agency in contributing to each individual protest. Analysing the intra-action between human and non-human objects that developed agencies in each of these instances would enable the exploration of where power and agencies have manifested across each of these different contexts. For instance, reviewing the intra-action of the built environment with broadcasts by protestors in Cairo, compared to the same intra-action in New York, which could enable a deeper understanding of what led to the successes and failures of these movements.

These protests also highlight how 'thing power' can be created by events, and how a non-human object can then exercise 'thing power' for a long period afterwards. The focus of these movements on occupying a central space and utilising a powerful iconography – for instance the occupation of Tahrir Square in Egypt - has imbued that object with a lasting 'thing power'. In the same way that the storming of the Bastille retains an evocative 'thing power' in the context of the French revolution and their national consciousness, Tahrir square now holds a similar weight in Egypt. The events which occurred there imbued a lasting importance onto that space and, to those that recognise it, it now possesses its own vitality and capacity to generate an affect on them. Whether that is because they perceive it as the sight or a symbol of a successful revolution, or of a display of the power of collective action, or as an ultimately doomed attempt to establish a functioning and democratic state is not necessarily the point. The point is that it fundamentally has a substantial thing power which came due to these protests, and within which a degree of agency lies.

This thing power exists not just the spaces that were occupied, or in which these events occurred, but also in certain objects which were associated with the movements – for instance the Wall Street Bull - became powerful symbols of the values that Occupy protestors were forwarding.

Existing research on this topic – for instance the work by Castells (2012) and Gerbaudo (2012), focus solely on the meaning and agency that humans have derived from the non-human social media channels and smart phones. Castells theories regarding how social media has expanded the 'space of place' and 'space of flows' focus on the expansion of the capabilities and avenues for human-to-human interaction that these new tools enable, with little analysis on how the nature of this interaction is fundamentally altered by these objects. This is an area that could be expanded upon by applying more-than human framework to this issue, using a flat ontology in which the communication channels made available through social media and smart phones are given equal weighting to the human beings which are communicating through them. This would provide scope to deliver some interesting insight on the ways in which these new channels have influenced the organisational tactics, communication style and human behaviour – grounding some agency into the tools themselves.

The concept of distributive agency is enlightening when applied to a specific context, for instance the Arab Spring. There are a range of factors that are often cited as having contributed to the wave of revolutionary protests that swept across North Africa and the Middle East, and if we accept that the world is part of a deep, interconnected web of processes in which no single entity could ever be isolated as having ultimate agency, then an analysis which accounts for all of these factors would be satisfying. Many things could be said to have caused the Arab Spring – decades of democratic repression, adverse economic conditions, the rise of social media, the powerful symbolism of power Tahrir Square, the actions of Mohamed Bouazizi. A framework which distributes agency across these many factors and accounts for the non-human objects which also affect change is useful – and in this framing, elements are better conceived not as solitary ‘entities’ or ‘causal factor’ but as actants.

Another area that is currently under-explored in the literature, and an aspect of the New Materialist approach that would be intriguing to explore in this topic area, would be to analyse the assemblages of each protest that occurred during this wave to investigate the agency flowing through each event. These protests were so amorphous and rhizomatic that it would be difficult to characterise any as representative of the wills of any one specific actor and therefore lends itself more to an analysis of the assemblage. Using the methods of Muller (2015) to explore the capacity of social media forums to act as an affective assemblage in these contexts.

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**Mark: 78**

This is an excellent piece of work. Your discussion of the more than human/new materialist framework and its particular contributions to social theory is very succinct and clearly written. Well done on this. However, it could have been better referenced...

It was a great idea to look at the 2011 global protests. You do a really nice job of thinking about what a more than human lens could contribute to existing literature.

Very well done on an original and highly engaging assessment.