

Volume 12 Number 2 (2018): 180-183  
<http://www.infactispax.org/journal>

ISSN 2578-6857

## Book Review

**Review of:** *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* by Zeynep Tufekci. Yale University Press, 2017. 360 pp. \$26 (hardcover). \$16 (paper).

By Ayman Alsadawi

*Kent State University*

*Twitter and Tear Gas* endeavors to explain how digital technologies are used by activists and as governance. Zeynep Tufekci considers the effects that technological advancement has on the success rate and organization of a social movement, and the capacity of “networked” global movements. Tufekci defines “networked” as the reconfiguration of publics and movements through assimilation of digital technologies (x). The author argues that networked movements, such as the Egyptian revolution of 2011, cannot be measured as success or failure based on traditional models of social movements (xiv). She argues that, “digital technologies were profoundly altering the relationship between movement capacities and their signals” (xii). The book describes how technological affordances (actions a given technology facilitates or makes possible) are intertwined with culture, politics, and civics in social movements, which distinguish a movements capacity to carry out their objective. Signals that indicate a capacity, such as strikes and boycotts, can be a tool to understand how a social movement or the government will potentially act (xi). To conceptualize the perceived

reconfiguration of the public sphere, Tufekci draws examples from the “Arab Springs” and illustrates the transformation of Turkey. The chapters use qualitative data to portray how social media and continuously updating computer algorithms are employed in the orchestration of a social movement, specifically in demobilization efforts. The concepts that Tufekci incorporates are directed towards the trajectories of networked social movements and their capacities.

The government or opposing party may use technology to manipulate a social movements capacity; by understanding the technological affordances and the indications of capacity, a social movement may also develop strategies to overcome the hinderance of their mobilization resulting in a more prepared and successful campaign. These implications may provide a foundation for further research into nonviolent strategy and enhanced methodology to demobilize violent operations and allow peace researchers to predict and prepare for conflict. Tufekci offers a perspective from both sides of a conflict; how the activists are limited and or advanced by technology, and the government also uses computer algorithms and other technologies to their benefit. There is also a distinct link to global security methods and controlling the population which is demonstrated by how the government utilizes media platforms; yet the book neglects the origin and objective of social media as a security method, a component of governance.

*Twitter and Tear Gas* could potentially contribute to research in different aspects of the political science field. There are three parts of the book that Tufekci constructs beginning with how digital technology has been implemented to mass mobilize and demobilize the society. The next section discusses how technology can be a tool for the public even though it is volatile and manipulated by the repressive authority to demobilize or mobilize specific target populations. The third and final section, Tufekci elaborates on the aftermath of networked global social movements indicates for the power and capacities of the people, and governmental responses to networked movements.

In *Part One: Making a Movement*, Tufekci emphasizes two resources of digital connectivity, attention and censorship. Activists are heavily dependent on attention, without attention they cannot reach their target audience. Social media provides that attention and can rapidly mass mobilize. However, mass media and governments attempt to deny activists

attention through censorship (30). The ability of social media to mobilize people quickly and without a leader draws attention to the campaign yet it often lacks an institutionalized structure and does not have the capacity to sustain itself. Tufekci terms this model as an “adhocracy”, “tasks can be accomplished in an ad hoc manner by whoever shows up and is interested” (53). Social movement culture has been spread through social platforms, and the affordances of technologies.

In *Part Two: A Protester’s Tools*, she explains how technology and society interact (117). “There is a range of what is possible based on what is known” (121). This statement encompasses the idea of security mechanisms, as well as the capacities of social movements. Tufekci analyzes how algorithms are used to target individuals with specific information, continuously gathering data to know what will potentially happen next. *Part Three: After the Protests* closes reiterating that, “the strength of social movements is dependent on their capacities which interacts with the powerful as they assess and respond to the movements signals” (191). The book is concluded with a chapter on how the *Governments Strike Back* exemplifying cases where the government responds to a movement using media. For example, the Chinese president responded to a protest by denying activists any media coverage and heavily censored social networking sites (203). In another instance during the 2016 military coup in Turkey, President Erdogan accessed the news media through a FaceTime call as he was being held captive in which he mobilized masses of the population to take to city squares, major buildings, and airports and to resist the attempted coup (257). Overall, Tufekci weighs the affordances and the reciprocations of networked movements.

*Twitter and Tear Gas* examines the interactions of society and digital technologies and how governments implement algorithms and technological developments to demobilize or mobilize the population. They target specific audiences and censor information on the web. In networked global social movements, activists employ social media as a method that generates a massive, ad hoc, but often unprepared campaign. Tufekci argues that the transformative public sphere of digital technology has altered the relationship between movement capacities and their signals (xii). If a movement applies the knowledge that may be gained by reading this book, they may be better prepared to overcome interference in their success and develop strategic methods that can also subdue violence. It

may potentially provide scholars in peace studies with research on how to indicate and predict if a movement will result in conflict. Overall, Tufekci offers an insightful work on the significance of technological affordances, providing a perspective from both the activist and the government's utilization of technology. However, the book has potential to be improved by analyzing how technology is implemented by the government for securitizing the population. The implications of social media for both the activist and for authorities raises further inquiries, such as, how do authoritative regimes have access to the global web? Who provides the network that allows cultures to interact and assimilate? If the government manipulates mass media, then how do activists know if they are being mobilized for a cause purposefully through targeted ads and information? If the government can control the mobilization of the population, then they also may determine which movements will be successful.