

Book Reviews

Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest

Zeynep Tufekci

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Zeynep Tufekci, a sociologist and associate professor in the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina, is a prolific scholar and a frequent contributor to many high profile popular-writing venues, including *The New York Times*. She's delivered two TED talks, those highly polished mini-lectures on an ecstatic range of topics packaged into compelling and consumable lunch-break-long videos that begin with an exploding supernova (or is it a firing neuron) and the phrase IDEAS WORTH SPREADING. In a moment when academics are being constantly reminded of the value of "working in public" and "maintaining our personal brands," Tufekci is an excellent scholar and a master at keeping her work accessible to the general public while maintaining academic rigor in her scholarly publications.

So it is not surprising that her first full-length book, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, released by Yale University Press in the summer of 2017, is a good book with valuable scholarly content. It is not, however, itself a scholarly monograph. In the preface, Tufekci notes that this text is aimed at a general audience, one

"ranging from an interested student in college or high school, to activists involved in these movements, to people who care about how digital technologies and social change impact the world" (p. xix). That is a broad net to cast. Such a diverse audience has a wide range of needs from a given text, especially in terms of background information and the complexity of the arguments presented. Tufekci manages the authorial trick of addressing this diverse group of ideal readers well, but ultimately this means that the book chooses not to do the more detailed, complex work one might have otherwise expected from a scholar of Tufekci's standing. It is possible this is because of the breadth of the intended audience: With so many people to reach, it is difficult to rely on any given member of the imagined audience to follow where she might otherwise want to go.

Tufekci's website highlights positive reviews from *Inside Higher Education*, *Publisher's Weekly*, and the *Washington Post*, all of which laud the book's readability. This is true, *Twitter and Tear Gas* is an admirably readable, compelling text, but it is ultimately airy. Tufekci's scholarly sharpness is present. So, too, are first-person sections of text describing the life of her grandmother and sit-downs in cafes with informants and inquisitive seagulls.

An academic reader might expect these field-notes-style sections to serve a methodologically reflective purpose, but that doesn't appear to be Tufekci's

goal in including them. In places, *Twitter and Tear Gas* reads like reportage, and the text as a whole contains a wealth of direct experience from the front lines of Gezi, Tahrir, and Zucotti Park, some of it Tufekci's own, some her informants'. Tufekci has spent a great deal of time in the field, and her own history in Turkey informs her analysis, as in a particularly memorable section where Tufekci compares her memories of the pre-internet coup d'état in 1980 with her experience watching the 2016 coup attempt unfold over Twitter and on nonstate television. The salience of other anecdotes is harder to pin down.

The book's most notable academic contribution lies in its articulation of its analytical approach. Since the early 1990s, social movement studies has been preoccupied with the question of whether the existing body of theory was sufficient to tackle movements embedded in networked communications technologies (NCTs), or whether NCT-powered movements were so different from those that came before as to require a whole new body of theory. Tufekci's *capacities* and *signals* approach offers a method to square that particular circle by:

shifting the analysis from outcomes and indicators like protest size and number of rallies to underlying capacities and capabilities, and to better comprehend the dialectic and co-evolving landscape of threat, leverage, and challenge between social movements and the powerful. Looking at protest and other acts of social movements as *signals* of underlying capabilities help us examine how digital technologies can simultaneously empower movements and increase their capabilities but also complicate social dynamics, introduce new ones, and even fuel fragilities. (p. 269)

Using this approach, Tufekci critiques those scholars who have faulted NCT-powered movements like Occupy Wall Street for not possessing the tactical and organizational maturity of previous protest movements. The Zucotti Park occupation was essentially the inception point of the Occupy movement, but scholars and others have often critiqued it as though it was a mature movement. We are used to reading the *signaling* of complex logistical planning, such as that required by a large march or prolonged occupation, as an indication of established and hard-won capacity building, like that required by the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott or the 1963 March on Washington. Tufekci notes in this text that the affordances of networked technologies, and particularly of social media, may allow social movements to quickly assemble impressive protest actions, sometimes without even meaning to, and without establishing the baseline capacities such manifestations have previously indicated:

[The *signals* and *capacities*] approach also allows multiple dynamics to be considered in relationship to one another, and us to analyze the complex impact of digital technologies. Capabilities are like muscles that need to be developed; digital technologies allow 'shortcuts' which can be useful for getting to a goal, but bypass the muscle development that might be crucial for the next step. It is difficult, if not impossible, to develop one set of muscles without also developing others that work in support and coordination; digital technologies can sever or alter this link, allowing for the social movement equivalent of a bodybuilder with massive pectorals but no biceps or deltoids to speak of. (p. 269)

Tufekci has made this point before in her 2014 *Journal of International Affairs* article “Social Movements and Governments in the Digital Age: Evaluating a Complex Landscape.” Similarly, her argument that in the context of social media, attention should be considered a resource separate from media coverage—in contrast to arguments historically made by scholars like Todd Gitlin, who in writing on the anti-Vietnam War protests led by Students for a Democratic Society conflates media coverage with attention—was published in her 2013 *American Behavioral Scientist* article, “‘Not This One’: Social Movements, the Attention Economy, and Micro-celebrity Networked Activism.” The issue is not that Tufekci has made these arguments elsewhere: They are valuable contributions to the field and deserve to be highlighted in this book. But these

arguments stay separate in *Twitter and Tear Gas*; they are not knitted and developed together into a deeper insight into the nature of networked social movements. In pursuit of her goal of general accessibility, Tufekci misses an opportunity to take the next analytical, syncretic step.

While I enjoyed the book and will shortly be lending out my review copy to interested civilians, I doubt I will return to it myself. *Twitter and Tear Gas* would be a good text for an undergraduate seminar, but for graduate students or more senior scholars in the fields of social movement studies or communication studies, Tufekci’s previously published scholarly work covers the academic contributions present in this text more directly.

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