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The Medium and the Movement: Digital Tools, Social Movement Politics, and the End of the Free Rider Problem

Zeynep Tufekci

This is a response to the article by Ethan Zuckerman “New Media, New Civics?” published in this issue of Policy & Internet (2014: vol. 6, issue 2). Dissatisfaction with existing governments, a broad shift to “post-representative democracy” and the rise of participatory media are leading toward the visibility of different forms of civic participation. Zuckerman’s article offers a framework to describe participatory civics in terms of theories of change used and demands places on the participant, and examines some of the implications of the rise of participatory civics, including the challenges of deliberation in a diverse and competitive digital public sphere. Zeynep Tufekci responds.

KEY WORDS: Internet, politics, protest, civics, collective action, new media

In his sweeping study of social movements since the French Revolution, sociologist Chuck Tilly (2004) talks about three aspects common to all of them: identity claims (“we are here, we are queer”), assertions for standing (“gays as a constituency with interests”), and program claims (“legalized gay marriage”). Almost all movements combine some or all three, with differing emphases. However, as Ethan Zuckerman (2014) writes in his insightful piece pondering the new civics, more and more of twenty-first century movements, especially those for which social media is integral, concentrate on the first, or at most the second of Tilly’s aspects, and disdain from engaging in “traditional politics,” or “program claims” to use Tilly’s language.

Many in the new participatory civic movements focus on expressing themselves, or establishing themselves as a constituency, but adamantly choose not to engage the third front: they don’t form political parties, organize formal organizations, file lawsuits, or other common tactics of movements with policy demands. Examples of such movements include Occupy Wall Street in the United States, the Indignados (or #m15) in Spain, Italy, and Greece, some segments of the activists in initial Tahrir protests (#jan25), and Gezi Park protests in Turkey (#direngezi).

It's not that these movements don't have policy demands, but the demands that can be identified as such are often frozen in the form initially articulated in the call that brought the protesters together ("save Gezi Park," or "Mubarak resign") rather than evolving over time through strategic and organizational decisions—in fact, these movements generally do not spring from such organizations in the first place and thus have no instrument through which they can alter the initial demands. Sydney Tarrow (2011) refers to these as "we are here" movements and compares the current wave to the waves of strikes and discontent in the United States in the 1930s—but, of course, there is a key difference, as Tarrow notes: the wave of discontent in the 1930s led to the election of Roosevelt and the laying of the foundations of the "New Deal," a lasting structural change, although one that has been curbed and eroded. A similar shift in governance or an electoral response has not been forthcoming, at least yet, from the recent wave of movements.

The first question is *why* so many protesters want as little as possible to do with the institutionalized powers they are protesting. The second question is the relationship between this *why*, and *how* these movements are organized—without formal organizations, and using social media. My argument is that the *why* and the *how* are thoroughly intertwined against the backdrop of a long-term cultural trend toward horizontal, noninstitutional movements. This trend predates the Internet, and can be traced to at least the 1968 movements in realization (Gitlin, 1980), and perhaps even earlier in aspiration (Turner, 2013).

The Intertwining of the How of Protests With Why of Protesters

Technology increasingly allows protesters to organize spectacular movements more easily (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). This situation is at once desired by many contemporary protesters and enabled by technology. The *how* of new politics—organizing through advanced communication tools rather than formal institutions—makes it harder for movements to engage policy through paths, such as elections, court cases, and primary challenges, that require formal and institutional organizational structure. The resulting mode of organization necessarily structures movements into a form that can express identity, grievances, and concerns, and assert claims to standing, but has little or no interface to what [Zuckerman \(2014\)](#) refers to as "traditional politics." The new digital tools of the protesters allow this configuration, while their dispositions desire it. (None of this is meant to deny all other substantive impacts of these movements ranging from the biographical impacts or to changes in the agenda of the country, such as the 99 percent framing. However, I'm discussing the impact within the context of traditional politics as discussed by Zuckerman, and focusing on the electoral, legal, and policy dimensions.)

The New Civics Remains (Mostly) Thick

I agree that the "disillusionment with traditional politics" that Zuckerman (2014) writes about is real, deep, and global—and not hard to understand. From a

financial crisis that has resulted in worsening of life-chances for everyone but the very rich, to global challenges like climate change that most existing institutions have been inadequate to confront, from growing authoritarianism to a money-laden political process in Western democracies, traditional politics has given young people—and most everyone else—ample reason to be disillusioned with politics through and through. I would, however, disagree with Zuckerman that “thick versus thin” engagement fully identifies the poles of this new modality. Many occupiers around the world gave enormous amounts of time and energy to the effort. Tahrir 2011 was neither easy nor “thin”—more than 800 people were killed. Gezi protesters were not thinly engaged during or after the movement. I think many participants in these new civics would dispute Zuckerman’s (2014, p. 158) assertion that they assume that “someone else, presumably, has done the thinking and concluded that what’s needed to persuade or to make a point is mass participation.” In fact, their personal sense might just be the opposite. Based on my interviews and observations from multiple protests, I would also say that movement participants do not see their job as “simply to show up: to the rally, to sign the petition, to change your profile picture” (Zuckerman, 2014). They see their own agency as crucial—there is no sense of delegation, or acceptance of “tell me what to do.” The engagement is thick, in fact, almost overly thick. Every one of them aspires to be an empowered individual, and many cherish this empowerment. Institutionalization, which requires delegation and hence handing over individual empowerment to others, is thus viewed with great suspicion exactly because self-empowerment is cherished.

Perhaps, in discussing thin engagement, Zuckerman is talking about cause campaigns like “Kony 2012” or “Save Darfur,” about which I would agree. Such cause campaigns, especially the celebrity-driven ones, indeed are thin, top-down, and expect fairly little from its participants. However, this kind of thin engagement differs somewhat from other kinds that Zuckerman talks about, such as people changing their profile to pro-gay marriage signs, or declaring themselves as gay online. “Save Darfur” is an identity claim with little connection to the cause itself: there is rarely anyone in most ordinary people’s networks who opposes saving Darfur, and there is little connection between the identity—“I’m the kind of person that clicks on Save Darfur”—and any tangible policy outcome or path to change.

On the other hand, just showing up in a symbolic manner for legalizing gay marriage is an assertion, often with consequences, and a commitment to a very real policy (and cultural) fight. In some contexts this may be easy and indeed thin: a college student from a progressive family in a liberal college town. In other contexts, it is thick engagement: a high-school student from a conservative family and a small school in a rural, red state—an actual example recounted to me by a young adult for whom the online visibility of gay people was life-changing as she broke with the political views of her peers and family. As this example shows, “slacktivism” as a category is not meaningful or explanatory; symbolic acts can be consequential, especially over the long-term, in some contexts, while indeed being superficial and largely irrelevant in others. The key distinction for symbolic acts

is not whether they are online or not, but the political context within which they are committed. Online acts can be thin (clicking to save Darfur) or fraught with consequences (Ai Wei Wei tweeting or Alexei Navalny blogging). Their technical ease does not by itself capture or correspond to the depth of the engagement.

Social movements that take to the streets are usually engaged in fairly thick activities. And it's a myth that current protest movements are formed through weaker ties than was the case in the past, or that current protesters do not make strong ties through them. In fact, in protests of yesteryear, it might have been harder to keep in touch with fellow protesters (unless one exchanged contact information, and then meticulously kept up). Many new movement participants now keep in contact with people they first met in protests through affordances of social media. As for yesterday's protesters having known each other in advance of street action, that's likely just as true today. Many people come to these "spontaneous" protests in friend groups and, furthermore, activate their own social networks through social media (Conover, Ferrara, Menczer, & Flammini, 2013). But also, many people who are only weak ties to each other before showing up to the physical protest may become strong ties during. Little else is more conducive to forming strong ties than facing together a life-changing experience involving significant state repression, and even potential death. Many protesters I interviewed in Tahrir or in Gezi talked about this, and, I still observe close interactions between people who became strong ties through protests.

The Tools and the Desires of Social Movements

So, if street protests are thick in many dimensions, and if protesters are thickly engaged with each other and their movement, what then is different about these movements? Zuckerman is surely right that there are differences; his essay points to many not discussed here. I'd like to propose that a key difference is in the intertwining of tools with movement goals that are conditioned by the disillusionment that Zuckerman discusses at length.

First, the "tool," social media, is not an ancillary factor in these movements, one whose consideration can be added as an afterthought to analysis:

Social media, an integral aspect of all these movements, is not a mere 'tool' that is external to the organizational and cultural structure of these movements. Instead, it has become increasingly clear that communication is a form of organization, and the form of communication strongly interacts with the form of organization. (Tufekci, 2014)

To understand how the tool shapes the movement, I propose conceptualizing movements as collective actors with "capabilities" (in the sense developed by Sen [1999]: capabilities as the set of functionalities an actor can potentially undertake). I also consider digital tools as instruments with affordances, or practices they allow and make easy. The crux of the argument is that affordances of digital media allow movements to develop certain capabilities—engagement, protests,

occupation, counterpublics ([Fraser, 1990](#)), synchronization, visibility, publicity, logistics, coordination, attention, etc.—without needing as much the traditional political tools that the protesters are disillusioned with and are, in fact, trying not to develop, engage, or use.

Thus, technology and long-term cultural trends are converging toward non-institutional politics, and this convergence has a powerful effect on movement trajectories. Similar to Zuckerman, I have found the same reluctance to engage with institutional politics in my own research from Tahrir Square ([Tufekci & Wilson, 2012](#)) to Gezi Park ([Tufekci, 2013](#)). Similarly, many “Occupy Wall Street” participants were reluctant even to form “spokescouncils” which would represent a minimal level of formalization and institutionalization as compared with the “General Assembly” that meets daily and in which there is no boundary for membership (or lack thereof) besides showing up that day.

In June of 2013, after tense weeks of protest and occupation, when it was announced from the sound stage at Gezi Park that the government had invited a delegation to discuss their demands, many in the crowd booed. I asked a few of them why they were unhappy, when the announcement meant that they were finally being recognized. They replied that they didn’t trust any aspect of such a discussion—not the government, not the idea of delegation, not the idea of negotiating. Their engagement with the protest was thick and their sense of empowerment was very strong—and perhaps paradoxically, it was that very thick, empowered engagement that contributed to their distrust of the inevitable delegation and institutionalization that a process such as negotiating with the government would bring about. It’s not just that these new movements display a suspicion of official institutions. There is a significant mistrust of *all* institutions, including those ostensibly their own. The question, then, is whether there is an inverse relationship between the empowerment of individuals and that of institutions. Do these new tools, which allow more individual public authorship and self-expression than ever before at the same time make it harder for institutions to act on behalf of a collective public, which is no longer a mass of undifferentiated voices but empowered individuals with their own voice—which they are often loath to delegate to an institution.

In Gezi Park, the participants discussed with me the tensions they felt between “the ones with the flags” and the “ones without the flags,” that is, those who belonged to nongovernmental organizations or other organizations and those who did not. All were in opposition to the government, of course. The “ones with the flags” were fewer, and did not constitute the bulk of the people who showed up with tents to “occupy” Gezi. Those “without the flags” strongly resisted the ones with, and in the park itself, only a few “flag” groups were allowed—limited to those who had already been there when the occupation started as a small group. In Doha, a few months into the Arab uprisings, I had watched the new generation of activists roll their eyes and “tweckle” (heckle on Twitter) well-known, “established” dissidents from Egypt and Tunisia, some of whom had endured torture and decades in prison. The young activists did not trust them. In the United States, Occupy Atlanta did not allow veteran civil-rights leader and

Congressman John Lewis the chance to speak—he wanted to address the crowd in support but was denied because he was seen as “a government figure.”

“This isn’t political” was a sentiment I have heard often from protesters, even as protesters proceed to voice deeply political demands: strengthening the rule of law, removing media censorship, lifting police repression and overreaction. What they often meant was that they did not expect “politics” to solve their deeply political demands. Politics of all stripes, dissident or not, as well as institutions with a whiff of formalization, even their own, has been pushed out of the circle of legitimacy. It’s important to reiterate the role affordances of digital tools plays in this process: The current civic moment of noninstitutional but thick engagement with politics is made possible exactly because these tools allow movements to undertake some endeavors, including quite impressive ones, without needing to grapple, at least initially, with the implications of choosing not to build certain institutional capacity.

Overall, this new configuration of protest movements and civics is strong in some dimensions (attention, coordination, publicity, etc.) and less potent in others (elections, policy changes). Using the affordances of digital tools, protesters can skip over some of the tedious work of yesterday’s movements (Tufekci, 2014) but are then left with protests that lack the institutional capacity such work engenders.

Protesters are empowered at the individual level, and the protests themselves have become rewarding through their creative, colorful, and powerful expressive ability. Olson’s (1971) famous “free rider” problem is thus largely irrelevant to most modern protests in nontotalitarian states: people who show up for protests are not accepting an onerous burden but rather are attracted by the engaged, powerful effervescence the protests create (Durkheim, 2001). The new free-rider question is the inverse: it’s not who will protest, rather, it is who, if anyone, will do the unpleasant, tedious long-term instrumental work of engaging in electoral, legal, and policy domains for the purposes of challenging and changing power?

New technology is fueling a new politics, still in transition, in which old forms of governance continue to rule the world—perhaps not as absolutely—as new challengers gear up, disillusioned but also empowered. Yet the challengers want to challenge on their own terms and, partly thanks to digital affordances, are increasingly able to do so. It’s an interesting, unstable, and complex transition, as the tools, challengers and old powers continue to evolve. That’s why raising these questions, as Zuckerman does, is so important: what challengers choose to do in this new civic participatory environment is a key determinant of where it will go, and one may hope that the insights that scholarly study of these questions yield can be of some help in this reconfiguration and transition.

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