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Book Review

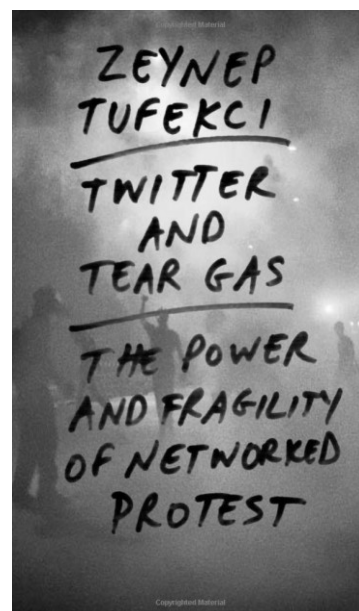
Twitter and Tear Gas

Tufekci, Zeynep (2017): *Twitter and Tear Gas – The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 360 pages. ISBN 978-0300215120.

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In her new book, Zeynep Tufekci, “Techno-sociologist”, intends to revisit social movement theory: in an era where dimensions of time and space are shifting against the background of globalization and digitization, she calls for the need to formulate new benchmarks and new indicators in the study of networked social movement trajectories. Indeed, the emancipatory uprisings in North Africa, Yemen, Syria or Bahrain in 2010/2011, the “Occupy” protests in the US, the Gezi protests in Turkey in 2013 or protests in Hong Kong in 2016 have posed new questions to scholarship. Tufekci provides unagitated, in-depth analysis to answer these questions. As the title “Twitter and Tear Gas” in its juxtaposition suggests, she overcomes the analytical boundaries of a distinct on- and offline investigation, inspecting instead protest dynamics in the “networked public sphere”, which Tufekci defines as the “reconfigured public sphere that now incorporates digital technologies as well” (p.xxviii). While on the one hand for example, information is more easily accessible for a broader range of people, the (mis)information “glut” brings about the need to manage these new resources. This is when core categories of analysis shift or develop: What is information worth without attention that is brought to it?



The core question of the book is thus how the dynamics in the networked public sphere have impacted the allocation and redistribution of resources. The multi-layered investigation revolves around the thesis that attention is a key resource for social movements. Zeynep Tufekci convincingly argues that attention is no longer monopolized by elitist gatekeepers in traditional mass media that open and close spaces for the representation of social movements in a hegemonic public sphere. Here, the author mainly distinguishes two new forms of gatekeeping: the networked gatekeeping function and the algorithmic gatekeeping. Both lack transparency (which is not to say that the former elite's decisions are publically accountable). Censorship, on the other hand is defined as "denial of attention" implemented by governments or, and this is the very important contribution to scholarship, by private companies. While she develops this argument mainly with regards to citizen journalists and new intermediaries, in the epilogue these questions are explored more systematically with regards to the US elections of 2016.

The book comprises an introduction, three parts and an epilogue: In the introduction, the author spans the horizon of her inquiry and introduces key terminologies such as the networked public sphere, attention, capacities and signals. The author calls for complexity, not false dichotomies: Throughout the book, she indeed manages to circumvent the binaries of the "internet optimism versus pessimism" debate, but rather acknowledges the reproduction of different (I would add: intersecting) power structures in a "reconfigured logic" of possibilities of interaction, scales and visibilities in the networked public sphere (p.11).

In the first part, entitled "Making a Movement", Zeynep Tufekci traces different publics and social movements, navigating between and finding common patterns in the early Zapatista and Gezi movements, while also referencing the civil rights movement in the US as a sort of historical blueprint. Drawing from rich and surprising observations and material, this part is empirically strong and invites the readers to the very moments where "globalization from below" can be felt giving insights into development of "square spirits". For example, coalition-building, decision-making and tactics are explored during the protests in Istanbul in 2013 in the Taksim Square, drawing from participatory observation. Far from a romanticizing account, the author also addresses persisting sexist and racist power structures within the square pointing to exclusion mechanisms and pitfalls of adapted methods. For example, the author introduces the concept of "tactical freeze", when a movement that was brought together to protest is unable to respond to new developments because it had not had the time to develop necessary tactics and important capacities.

The second part, "A Protester's Tool", focuses on the technology itself. She moves away from social movement theory and empirical observations to reflect on the global dynamics between internet and society more generally. This part is crucial for the study of "New censorship regimes" (p.31). Expanding her analysis to global media economies, she argues that the ecology of the new media has brought about

a new business model that employs relatively little staff. The editing function is transferred to the many users of a platform, which Tufekci refers to as “networked gatekeeping”, and to technological algorithms. She explicitly bases her argument mainly on Facebook and Twitter. The power of the editing function of Facebook, where “the News feed is a world with its own laws” (p.157) is illustrated with many examples: the censoring of any content related to Kurdish culture and politics or the Black Lives Matter movement that had almost “tripped down by Facebook algorithms”, because it competed for attention with the Ice Bucket Challenge at the time.

Resuming the dangers in the networked public sphere represented in the monopolization of communication infrastructure by big companies the author finds that: “The privatization of communication spaces is like moving political gatherings to shopping malls” (p.137). Tufekci develops her argument drawing on insightful background information and technological know-how and provides analysis proper to a scholarly field that she has helped to construct in earlier publications. Her conclusion how “the political has become personal” (p.272), exemplified by the Facebook feeds blurring the boundaries between political information and mobilizing action and the private life, such as family, friends and health brings to mind the idea of the colonization of the “Lebenswelt” in modern societies, developed by Jürgen Habermas. The technological algorithms as a colonizing force represent the system world that infiltrates and restructures the institutional dimension of the public sphere.

In the third part “After the Movement” the author delves into the conceptual work of the signal and capacities approach with which she attempts to grasp the dynamics of movements in their interplays with political power. She distinguishes three forms of capacity that she looks at in more detail: First, the narrative capacity, which is the ability of a movement to “articulate a voice, gets its voice heard and have it responded to as legitimate” (p.195). Second, the electoral and institutional capacity, which signals to those in power that important votes or other important resources within the institutional context can be mobilized (p.196). Thirdly, the disruptive capacity, entails the capacity to “interrupt business as usual” (p.196f.) in the political process. The framework allows her to open the inquiry to what has been discussed in scholarship as “authoritarian learning”.

In light of the analytical framework, Tufekci looks at authoritarian responses and explores censorship as “a denial of attention through various forms” (p.270). The methods in this digital era of authoritarianism are exemplified by the Chinese case, what Ron Deibert has set as the “first generation of internet censorship”. However, Tufekci exposes new methods beyond the simple blocking drawing on examples from China (p.235), where bots and government accounts flood social media with different stories using a classical tactic of “derailing” attention from potentially mobilizing information. Within the signal and attention approach, the flooding of “fake news” that delegitimize, confuse and derail attention can be conceptualized

as a form of censorship as well. She hereby broadens the classical understanding of media censorship, which I regard as valuable contribution for political science and media studies in the future. In that context, the most disconcerting innovation in the networked public sphere, is the monetization of fake news and rumors outpacing the wealth of accurate information. Where spreading propaganda can be “lucrative” (p.265), whole armies of fake news producers can be recruited worldwide for money at the service of corporations or government institutions. It is only now, especially with the US elections of 2016, that scholars, journalists and the broader publics begin to grasp the powerful potential of these new developments.

While Tufekci explicitly investigates left emancipatory movements, it would be interesting to apply the capacity model to right wing and extremist movements. Also, a classification on the scale of analysis by defining the public sphere(s) (for instance, by distinguishing for example hegemonic or counterpublics? Local, national or transnational publics?) in which social movements gather attention in more detail could strengthen her argument even more and give more practical guidelines for empirical investigations in the future.

This book is a compulsory reading for anyone researching social movements and the social, political and economic impacts of technology. Written in an accessible language it can also reach counterpublics beyond academia, activists and security specialists alike and inspire analysis on digitalization and globalization.