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Home

## *Recent Posts*

[Info 200: Blog](#)

[Post 6](#)

[Info 200](#)

[Research](#)

[Paper Abstract](#)

[Info 200 Blog](#)

[Post #5:](#)

[Librarians and](#)

[Social](#)

[Movements](#)

[Info 200 Blog](#)

[Post #4: Article](#)

[Summary](#)

[Info 200: Blog](#)

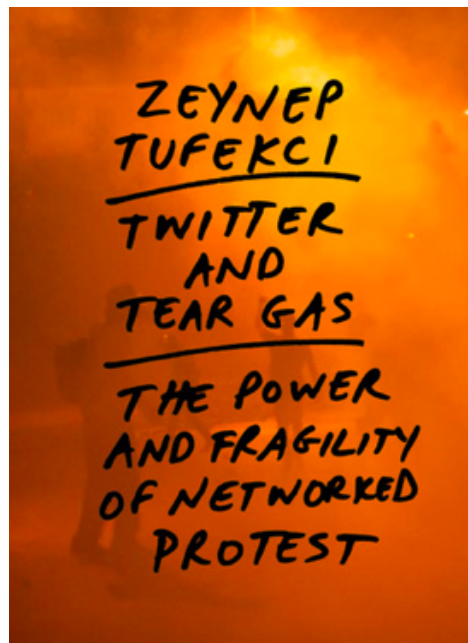
[Post 3 –](#)

[Disrupting Life](#)

[In the Round](#)

## INFO 200 Book Review: Twitter and Tear Gas

Posted on [September 23, 2018](#) by [Jason Weekley](#)



The Arab Spring was a series of revolutions and uprisings that quickly spread through North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. News organizations quickly identified the influential role that social media played in these movements

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[Info 200 Blog Post #5: Librarians and Social Movements](#)

Michael Stephens on  
[Info 200 Blog Post #4: Article Summary](#)

## Archives

[December 2018](#)

[November 2018](#)

[October 2018](#)

and quickly began calling it the Twitter Revolution. Despite the rapid spread of revolution throughout the region, many of these countries found themselves under the same authoritarian rule only a short time later. In *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, Zeynep Tufekci (2017) makes an in-depth analysis of the role of digital technologies in social movements. By examining the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and other social movements, Tufekci argues that social media and other digital technologies greatly impact the rapid formation and spread of social movements, but that their use also create challenges to a movement's ability to effectively make change.

### Social media's role in the Tunisian uprising



Tufekci uses a capacities and signals approach to examine

[September](#)

[2018](#)

[August 2018](#)

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[Uncategorized](#)

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the role of digital technologies and how they influence social movements and protests. This approach looks at the capacities and capabilities of a social movement instead of viewing it based on outcomes and indicators. In other words, simply looking at the number of people a movement can quickly assemble does not show the effectiveness of a movement. To fully understand the impact of a movement, Tufekci looks at a movement's capacity to change the narrative, its power to disrupt the system of authority, and its ability to affect the electoral process or long-term institutional change. By using this approach, we can better understand the use of digital technologies in social movements beyond the immediate hype of large crowds demonstrating in the streets.

The main argument that Tufekci makes is that the internet allows networked movements to mobilize and grow rapidly, but at the expense of a sound organizational infrastructure that comes from years of movement building. Although social movements have existed long before the internet, digital technologies allow people to connect globally with people of similar interests and beliefs. The tendency of like-minded people to flock together is called homophily. Digital technologies also allow social movements to overcome pluralistic ignorance which is the tendency for people to think they are the only ones in the group who think and feel the way they do when in actuality there are other people in the community who would agree with them. Networked social movements can use digital tools to leverage social tendencies and use tools like Facebook and Twitter to quickly mobilize large groups for a common purpose. However, rapid expansion comes at a cost.

Tufekci argues that social movements that rapidly mobilize are unable to respond to challenges that arise because

they often do not have an internal infrastructure to effectively handle collective decision making. These movements tend to have an antiauthoritarian ethos and practice a horizontal approach to leadership. As a result, these movements are unable to shift tactics after the initial mobilization when they are confronted with new challenges. Furthermore, a lack of an explicit leadership structure makes it difficult to negotiate with adversaries and is often viewed by authorities as not being powerful enough to threaten the authority.

This book should be of interest to all librarians and information professionals for several reasons. One of the first spaces established at many of the movements analyzed in the book are street libraries. Whether it was in Tahrir, New York, or Hong Kong, establishing a library is a common element found in occupied protests globally. A reason for this, Tufekci states, is that libraries symbolize an ethic of non-commodified knowledge and are seen by protesters as aligning with their core beliefs. Shortly after the Occupy Wall Street protest began on September 17, 2011 in New York's Zuccotti Park, an informal library spontaneously formed that started with a pile of books that someone donated. This would shortly be organized into the People's Library and serve the information and entertainment needs of anyone who could access the library (Zabriskie, 2011).

## Occupy Wall Street 11/16/11 NYPD & Broo...



Another area of interest, from a LIS perspective, is that this book addresses how people encounter information within rapidly mobilized social movements. Although digital technologies have allowed movements to reach millions of people and to quickly mobilize large numbers of people, the result is that many of these people lack prior political experience. This is counter to the view of the protestor as an ideologue who has spent years engaging in a movement. According to Tufekci, modern networked movements are largely made up of people who do not usually seek out political and dissent sources of information and are therefore less likely to encounter dissident views. Many people in the movements that she researched

became active after seeing friends and family members posting on social media about the movement. As a result, governments and those in power, have learned that an effective way to limit attention to social movements is to create false or misleading information. Tufekci (2017) states, "Whereas a social movement has to persuade people to act, a government or a powerful group defending the status quo only has to create enough confusion to paralyze people into inaction." Therefore, who is encountering the information, where the information encountering occurred, what information is encountered (Erdelez, 1999), plays an important part in the formation and success of social movements.

*Twitter and Tear Gas* does an excellent job of analyzing the role of digital technologies in social movements. It goes beyond the superficial hype of the use of Twitter and Facebook in modern networked movements to rapidly mobilize large numbers of people, and it looks at how digital tools are used to influence a movement's capacity to make long term change. This book raises some interesting questions for the library and informational professional, particularly around the issue of what role should libraries play when members of its community are actively engaging in civil disobedience and how to effectively meet their information needs. Overall, it is a great addition to the research of social movements, technology, and information.

## References

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