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Rules for Digital Radicals

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Zeynep Tufekci, **Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest** (2017).

In 1971, activist and community organizer Saul Alinsky summarized lessons from a lifetime of organizing in his book, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*. Published in what would be the twilight of his life, *Rules for Radicals* was in many ways a tactical field guide for those seeking to instigate widespread social change. It still influences social movements on both the left and right. And yet, today's wired world is much different—and more dynamic—than Alinsky's pre-internet society, which relied largely on centralized forms of mass communication.

Now, both activists and governments operate under a new set of diffuse structures and communication mediums. Twitter, Facebook, and the like alter the terms of engagement for public protest and participatory democracy. And Zeynep Tufekci's new book, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, helps us understand precisely how networked communications can amplify social movements, at the same time that it provides important notes of caution. In this way, while written as an accessible scholarly account rather than an operation manual, Tufekci's book provides rules—or at least guideposts—for digital radicals.

Through detailed analysis of contemporary movements such as Occupy, Black Lives Matters, and the Gezi Park protests, coupled with comparisons to historical movements, such as the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Tufekci develops a framework for understanding how modern movements can exploit—and be exploited by—digital communication technologies.

What she highlights is that though social media permits movements to galvanize supporters quickly, helping them organize massive public protests in short order, something is lost in terms of internal, deliberative structure that a movement may need in order to survive down the stretch. Tufekci labels the collective bonds and capabilities developed through the constant maintenance of organizational communities "network internalities." Internal organizational contestation has long-term value.

Tufekci analogizes the work of developing network internalities to the importance of building muscles for long term durability. For example, she compares the March on Washington, which took months to plan and helped create enduring movement capacity through both formal and informal institutions, with the 2013 Gezi Park protest in Turkey. The Gezi Part protests were spawned almost overnight and helped generate a strong protest culture but, unfortunately, did not translate into a sustained political movement (yet).

In other words, while the ability to organize rapidly is no doubt a real asset afforded by digital communication tools, it comes with attendant limitations—organizational structures only start to be developed after the movement's first big moment, and often too late. Today's movements may lack the organizational structure for making collective decisions, limiting their ability to make tactical shifts as the protests unfold.

Perhaps even more significantly, quickly organized protests may fail to signal any long-lasting organizational capacity or threat to those in power. For Tufekci, social movements are only as powerful as the capacities that they signal. She identifies three principal, but non-exclusive, capacities that are critical to movements' success—narrative capacity (the ability to get the public's attention and tell the movement's story), disruptive capacity (the ability to interrupt the government's business as usual), and electoral capacity (the ability to credibly endanger politicians' electoral prospects).

As to each one, if a movement is able to organize massive amounts of people into a one-day protest, for example, the humongous Women's March that followed Donald Trump's inauguration, but that massive protest does not credibly signal a threat to the government's electoral chances, the impact of the protest is greatly diluted and permits the government to ignore, rather than engage and potentially overreact to, the protest. Underscoring Tufekci's point that participatory tactics are only as impactful as the capabilities they signal, Ben Wikler, a leader at MoveOn, recently implored people activated by Republican efforts to unwind the Affordable Care Act NOT to call congresspeople who didn't represent them. Otherwise, the strength of the signal provided by calls could be weakened and interpreted as not posing electoral capacity.

In the midst of developing her helpful capacity-signals taxonomy for analyzing movements' strengths, Tufekci foregrounds that although social media holds great promise in that it enables movements to circumvent traditional forms of media and gain direct attention for their respective causes, new forms of censorship are also being deployed. That is, governments and those in power are not sitting idly by—they too have in many instances embraced social media and used it to discredit mediums used by activists through the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories. Those in power are actively engaged in diminishing the attention movements receive.

But here, though an academic book rather than a practical field guide, Tufekci's thorough analysis nevertheless might have benefited a bit from the inclusion of—or gesture toward—some tactical solutions, akin to the approach utilized by Alinsky. Tufekci's lament of misinformation's role in hampering social movements might have been accompanied by reference to particular suggestions activists could employ to provide their social media posts with credibility. For instance, the Witness organization, which trains activists on how to use video to protect human rights, instructs activists to set the date and time on their cameras and to capture contextualizing details from the scene, both of which verify the authenticity of the images.

But aside from a handful of missed opportunities to make the lessons from her analysis more concrete (which may have been outside the scope of an academic project), Tufekci's book is a critical contribution for those seeking to understand how to best leverage social media for social change. While lauding movement activists' integrity and commitment to participatory forms of engagement that involve many, Tufekci also gently nudges today's activists to consider whether digital technologies can be utilized more efficiently and with longer-lasting effect. The book lives up to its title—highlighting networked activism's power and, equally if not more importantly, uncovering its weaknesses so that they may be overcome.

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