

Per the Resolution adopted in the thirty-eight session of the Human Rights Council on 6 July 2018, the Human Rights Council acknowledges, “That the participation in peaceful protests can be an important form of exercising rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, of expression, of association and of participation in the conduct of public affairs.” Today, social media and social networks have been adopted to facilitate peaceful protest, enable freedom of expression, and enhance participation in public life.

At the same time, governments have recognized the power of social media as a mechanism of peaceful protest and have taken steps to curtail its usage. By examining two post-Arab Spring protest movements, the current Algerian Protest movement and the 2013 Turkish Gezi Park protest movement, one can see how contemporary peaceful protests have been affected by the usage of communications technology such as social media and messaging apps.

Effective uses of new technologies as enablers of the exercise of human rights in the context of assemblies, including peaceful protests:

Social Media and the Revolution of Smiles

As the largest and most successful post Arab Spring protest movement, the 2019 Algerian Protests demonstrate how communications technologies have themselves become the platforms from which peaceful protests occur. The creative and artistic manner in which Algerians have used social media sites demonstrates that, for young Millennial and Generation Z protestors, communications technology is as much a tool for peaceful protest as any banner or poster.

One of the hallmarks of the Algerian Protests is the interconnectedness of the protestors in Algeria with dissidents from abroad. Through Youtube, the Hip-Hop artist and outspoken critic of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Raja Meziane, released a music video titled, *Allo le Système*. The video cuts between scenes of Meziane in a subway terminal rapping about the corruption and oppression within Algeria and footage of protestors on the streets of her home country. Meziane’s work highlights how communications technology allows those who cannot physically be on the ground at peaceful protests to still take part in the debate and express their right to peaceful assembly. While Meziane moved from Algeria to Prague in 2015 in order to escape the censorship imposed on her work by the Algerian Government, her songs and videos have become very popular with Algerian protestors. Lyrics from *Allo le Système* are not only heard sung on the streets of cities such as Algeria and Oran during protests, but have inspired protestors to engage in the debate by bringing a feeling of international solidarity to the movement.

Meziane’s case is just one of many in which new technologies have enabled peaceful expression for Algerians. Another way communications technology has contributed to peaceful protest in the Algerian context specifically, is by increasing the mediums through which Algerians express themselves. This has been a hallmark of the primarily youth driven protest movement. Young, technologically literate Algerians have taken to instagram and twitter to voice their opposition to the government through artistic and sophisticated means of expression.

To better understand this advancement in peaceful protest, one may look at the Instagram photograph by 21 year old photographer Rania G, titled, *Peaceful Protest*. The photograph, taken in March of 2019, is of 17 year old Algerian Melissa Ziad standing in a ballerina pose with the Algerian Flag behind her. Artistic, sleek, and cultured, the photograph of the young protestor went viral and became a popular image with protestors. Such images, taken by youthful protestors demonstrate how communications technology is broadening the public space for expression. Below her photograph on Instagram, Ziad writes, "An alternative to the dominant system can be expressed through artistic creativity, thus initiating a revolution in ways of thinking." Young Algerians have harnessed social media sites such as Instagram and Youtube to find new and creative outlets of expression. These technologies have not only allowed Algerians to voice their opinions, but have infused the protests with a spirit of innovation and inventiveness. At the same time, they are increasing the size of the audience protestors are able to engage with.

As the Algerian Revolution of Smiles is still ongoing, with protestors using social media sites like Instagram each day, more research on its role in peaceful protest needs to be conducted. Yet, a discussion on the role of new technology as an enabler of peaceful protest gains relevance by examining this highly contemporary protest example.

Communications Technology and 2013 Gezi Park Protests

Beginning on 28 May 2013, Turkish security forces began an operation to evict Protestors who were conducting a sit-in at Gezi Park, a public space in the Beyoğlu district of Istanbul. The images of riot police using tear gas and force against peaceful protestors lead to a massive backlash from segments of Turkish society. For over a month, Protestors and police clashed throughout Istanbul. In these clashes, Protestors relied heavily on social media and messaging apps such as WhatsApp. By examining how protestors utilized these forms of technology one can see that new technologies can assist in the mobilization of protestors and enhance on the ground communication between demonstrators.

In Gezi, as the government clampdown on protest was carried out, peaceful protestors found themselves in need of timely and up to date information regarding the location of police and the current security situation around them. As a secure and closed end form of communications technology, WhatsApp proved to be an ideal means of communication. WhatsApp was also used by protestors to fact-check posts that were seen on open-end social media accounts like Facebook. Because WhatsApp is a closed group messaging app, meaning users control who can access their group, and the transmission of exchange is nearly instantaneous, protestors consistently relied on it as a fact checking device, messaging friends within the group to see if accounts of the protest posted on social media were accurate.

In addition, WhatsApp messaging was used to facilitate physical meetings with fellow protestors. Through this usage, one can see how communications technology facilitates peaceful protest by allowing protestors to coordinate with each other. This serves to broaden the base of protestors and enhance the physical presence of them on the ground.

This is evident from a discussion with a 29 year old Turkish protestor published by the Journal of Computer Mediated Communications titled, "Social Media and Trust during the Gezi Protests"

Our group started as a WhatsApp group among a handful of close friends...As police violence escalated and security became the main concern the context of the conversation developed into logistics communication. That is, when each one of us started to add one or two close friends to this group...As we continued adding close friends to the group the number reached 100 and we decided to organize an offline meeting.

This example clearly demonstrates how the uses of communications technology shift during peaceful protest, allowing the users to determine which mechanisms best suit their needs at the time. In the example cited above, what started as a tool to exchange timely information morphed into a mechanism that facilitated physical gatherings with fellow protestors. Not only was a presence on the ground facilitated by communications technology, but members of the group were able to enlarge the size of their network and bring protestors who didn't know each other together. As a single case this example may appear to be relatively small; however, the way in which these small cases multiple, when conducted by dozens of protestors, can lead to large, significant gatherings. It is through such mechanisms that leaderless peaceful protestors are able to gather and develop an on the ground presence.

In an Article published by Open Democracy, titled, "Gezi Park: How did Visual Communications between protestors help create a movement," the authors Olu Jenzen and Aidan McGarry state, "Social media offers space for the creation of 'counterpublics'...and for new social meanings to emerge." As a sit-in movement, the Gezi Park protest provided ample room for the protestors to humanize their efforts by documenting their daily life. The authors of the Open Democracy article state, "mundane images of eating, sleeping, cleaning, reading, exercising and so on, constitute detailed signifiers of Gezi Spirit...mundane activities became acts of resistance which are documented and disseminated across social media platforms."

In the same way communications technology breaks down geographical barriers allowing dissidents from abroad to engage with their fellow citizens in their home country, it also allows protestors to engage on a more intimate level with those outside the movement. Through the sharing of images from everyday life, protestors are able to humanize themselves and their movement. This is a major attribute of social media. Technology can aide in giving protestors a human face that exists beyond media coverage.

When viewed in this context, it is no surprise that governments opposing peaceful protests view social media as a threat. During the height of the Gezi Park protests, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated, "there is now a menace which is called twitter. The best examples of lies can be found there. To me, social media is the worst menace to society." When taken in the context of the government's attempts to describe the Gezi Protestors as looters and radicals, any images that expose the humanity and commonality of the protestors with other citizens could be viewed as a threat. Communications technology allows protestors to take hold of the narrative. So long as they have a mobile phone, they can offer an alternative viewpoint to events on the ground which may conflict with the governments narrative.

Both the Algerian Revolution of Smiles and Gezi Park protest offer vivid examples of the way in which new technologies are facilitating peaceful protests. The uses are diverse; ranging from the facilitation of protest itself to providing new platforms of expression. While only six years separate the Gezi protest from today's Algerian Protest, and many of the technologies used then remain the same, it is clear that with growing familiarity and access, the level of sophistication in which protestors make use of communications technology is only growing.

Works Cited

1. Al Jazeera. "Algeria: The Revolution Will Be YouTubed." Algeria | Al Jazeera, Al Jazeera, 17 June 2019, www.aljazeera.com/programmes/listeningpost/2019/06/algeria-revolution-youtubed-190617073820581.html.
2. BOUZGHAIA, Chamseddine. "'Poetic Protest': How the Photo of a Ballet Dancer Became a Symbol of Algeria's Protests." France 24, 10 Mar. 2019, www.france24.com/en/20190310-algeria-poetic-protest-photo-dancer-ballet-ballerina-teenager-bouteflika.
3. Hacıyakupoglu, Gulizar, and Weiyu Zhang. "Social Media and Trust during the Gezi Protests in Turkey." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2015, pp. 450–466., doi:10.1111/jcc4.12121.
4. Jenzen, Olu, and Aidan McGarry. "Gezi Park: How Did Visual Communication between Protesters Help Create a Movement?" *OpenDemocracy*, 5 Dec. 2017, www.opendemocracy.net/en/performance-of-protest-gezi-park/.
5. Social and Humanities Research Council of Canada. "Youth and Activism in Algeria. The Question of Political Generations." Taylor & Francis, www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13629387.2019.1665289?journalCode=fnas20.