
The Revolution Will Be Tweeted

By Willow Curry

This summer, if anything, has been one to remember. At the very beginning of June, a small protest by Turkish citizens against the tearing down of a park was turning into a massive grassroots protest against the administration of Turkey's prime minister. On the 17th and 18th, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in Brazil to vent their frustration at the inequalities of the Brazilian economy. June 25 made Texas Democratic Senator Wendy Davis a hero after she filibustered a bill in the Texas Senate that would put severe restrictions on abortions. By early July, Egypt's democratically elected ruler Mohamed Morsi was ousted by the Egyptian military following widespread protests, and the middle of July brought a turning point in American race relations when the not-guilty verdict in the Trayvon Martin case sparked demonstrations all over America. How could these things have happened so quickly, so forcefully, capturing the world's attention?

Simple. The revolution has been twitterized.

I got that catchy phrase from a performance by a local spoken word poet, and it catches the essence of what's happening. Social networking sites did not just define these movements; they created them.

The Turkish protests started out as a small demonstration at Taksim Gezi Park, which was being torn down by the government to make way for new development. However, when photos and videos of the police's use of pepper spray and tear gas went viral, more and more people began congregating at the park, with word spreading on Twitter by the use of the #geziparki hashtag. Later, a lone man standing in the area in protest became the inspiration for the hashtag #durunadam, which, in Turkish, means "standing man." The Brazilian protests were similar. What started out as a relatively small protest against the state of public transportation spread like wildfire on Twitter and Facebook, with many people jumping on the bandwagon to speak out against injustice in the economy and education and healthcare systems. The protests were so massive that they actually had an effect: President Dilma Rousseff made a pact with Brazilian citizens that addressed all of the ills that protestors had rallied against.

The role of social media in Wendy Davis's filibuster was not as organic, but had a similar impact. The tweetstorm that launched her into national headlines was orchestrated by the Texas ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) to ensure coverage of her feat. Over 700,000 tweets tagged with #standwithwendy flooded Twitter, including tweets from Nancy Pelosi and President Barack Obama.

When presidents respond to Twitter, that says something.

The verdict of the Trayvon Martin case would have been felt in all corners of America even without social media, given the widespread TV and print media coverage of the case. But social me-

dia fanned the flames into a visceral debate, with Americans posting their reactions on Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. Social media helped in the organization of peaceful demonstrations throughout the country, a petition from the NAACP to file civil rights charges against Zimmerman (now with over 600,000 signatures), and the Boycott Florida movement, which has been picked up by many notable black entertainers. In truth, the Trayvon Martin case would never have gone beyond local headlines without social media: in March of 2012, a petition started by Trayvon Martin's parents on Change.org that called for Zimmerman to be arrested and charges filed against him gained two million signatures and forced the district attorney's office to review the case. If not for this staggering number of supporters, the case probably would not have seen the light of day.

How is social media able to make social change? I found three reasons, provided by Turkish activist blogger Zeynep Tufekci, that help to explain.

"Non-activist participation." Before the internet, news of protests was often passed along only in activist networks—people outside of this loop were unaware of what was going on. Raising awareness is extremely costly and time consuming through print, television, and radio, so it's more cost-efficient to keep the audience small. With the advent of social media, however, free publicity and the rapid spread of information have allowed people who wouldn't have known about rallies, marches, and filibusters to be able to support them.

"Breaking of pluralistic ignorance." Much of the inaction of the general public in the face of injustice is the feeling that we cannot possibly have an effect—why even bother responding? Social media has changed that. Now we can tune in to the opinions of the world, share our opinions and feel the same outrage. Brianna Bayo-Cotter, Change.org communications director, says: "Ten years ago, people would have read about this in the newspaper [referring to the Trayvon Martin case], then left it alone feeling sad. Now people can take their outrage and turn it into real action."

"External involvement." Typically, protests do not capture attention outside of the country in which they take place. However, the Internet allows people across the globe to see what is happening directly, with no media filters. This puts pressure on foreign governments and international agencies to become involved and protect human rights. And international pressure can be very powerful. We have yet to see just how big a role social media will have in the political landscape of the coming decades, but its effect has made it clear that these websites are becoming the new agents of democracy. Gil Scott Heron was right in his 1970's poem. The revolution, it is clear, will not be televised.

