

The Problem With Social Media Protests

Online movements can burn out faster than campaigns that spend months or even years forging in-person connections.

Antonia Malchik *The Atlantic* May 6, 2019



Lee Jin-man / AP

Social media are often thought of as the new ground for political and social activism. But while it's easy to create a social movement on Twitter or Facebook, translating that into actual policy change is very different.

Before the internet changed the speed at which the world moves, movements were slower-growing. A year of organizing and directly advocating for change led to the 13-month-long Montgomery bus boycott that began with Rosa Parks's act of resistance. The civil-rights movement took a decade to get to the March on Washington—time that Martin Luther King Jr. and his colleagues spent forming and deepening social connections, strengthening and testing the fiber of their movement.

By contrast, mass protests such as Occupy Wall Street formed rapidly but then, [lacking that underlying resilience](#) created over time, often lost focus, direction, and, most important, their potential to effect change. The Gezi Park protests in Turkey grew from nothing into a massive movement within days, demonstrating the power of organizing

using digital tools, according to *Twitter and Tear Gas*, a book by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill professor [Zeynep Tufekci](#). “However,” she wrote, “with this speed comes weakness, some of it unexpected ... The ease with which current social movements form often fails to signal an organizing capacity powerful enough to threaten those in authority.”

Society is run as a communal act, something we form together even when we disagree. Community is both possible and necessary because of our evolutionary interdependence, but also because we share space: air, water, soil, roads, towns, cities, landscapes. In particular, our physical communities are made of spaces in which we interact, mingle, and strive to get along. Public spaces are where we greet our neighbors, watch out for kids on bikes, [walk to work](#), give strangers directions, and bump into people because we’re typing “<<hugs>>” in response to a friend’s breakup news.

One of the single greatest factors in learning to trust and rely on one’s neighbors is a community’s walkability. The everyday dynamics that walkable neighborhoods provide also ensure the regular connections to the rest of humanity that each of us desperately needs. These interactions can be small, often almost inconsequential (that borrowed cup of sugar, say), but our brains have evolved to look for our tribes, our communities, [and our neighbors](#) to remind ourselves that we’re not alone. The trust that walking and walkability build between neighbors and communities, research has shown, significantly increases civic engagement while at the same time strengthening people’s ability to understand one another.

Effective protest requires not just the right of the people to gather, but accessible public spaces in which gathering is possible and citizens who understand what those rights are. “Public ‘streets and parks ... [from] time out of mind, have been used for purposes of assembly ... Such use of the streets and public places has, from ancient times, been a part of the privileges, immunities, rights, and liberties of citizens,’” stated a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1939 that upheld the right to assemble on the public streets, striking down a municipal requirement that such gatherings require a previously obtained permit.

These are powerful words, drawing on the lessons of history. When state and local governments began restricting the right to assemble to certain times and places, which they did in the United States starting in the 1800s, and when the Supreme Court started allowing these regulations to stand starting in the mid-1900s, those actions had very real consequences for democracy. As recently as 2017 and 2018, at least 30 U.S. state legislatures mooted, and in some cases passed, proposals that restricted the freedom of

assembly. Some laws banned the wearing of face masks or hoods while participating in protest; others sought to eviscerate the collective energy of assembly by loosening definitions that allow a legal protest to be considered an unlawful riot; and still others moved to give drivers legal immunity when they run over protesters who are obstructing a public road or highway.

Protesters in authoritarian countries such as Russia and Turkey have been arrested by the hundreds, if not the thousands, and their rights of assembly removed. Just as chilling for the future of democracy, perhaps, is the case of Spain in 2015. In answer to a blanket ban on protests of any kind, as well as marches or assemblies in front of Congress, activists resorted to protest by hologram. Eighteen thousand people sent in [holograms of themselves](#) protesting, which were projected in front of Congress on a loop for several hours while activist leaders gave speeches, also via hologram.

Is this, combined with the uncertain reality of online comments and petitions, our future? What government institution would respond to a hologram protest? Would they care? The [click-ready petitions](#) of the internet age are the perfect form for gathering tens of thousands of signatures quickly, but they're unlikely to be more effective at swaying an elected representative's vote than a crowd of in-the-flesh constituents presenting their requests and pleas in person.

That's aside from more recent revelations that foreign actors, trolls, and automated bot farms pretending to be citizens not only can hack away at societal unity through amplifying divisions, but also can generate millions of online comments aiming to sway public policy one way or another.

Digital technology has opened up unimaginable worlds of access and connectivity, but it has also brought into question its own role in undermining the foundations of governments built by people, for people. The realities of face-to-face contact and in-person mass protests, the tools of centuries of struggle for full citizenship and rights, have become even more essential to grounding us as we navigate through a new era of humans' relationship with technology. New eras of protest will have to learn how to combine the ease and speed of online connectivity with the long-term face-to-face organizing that gives physical protest its strength and staying power.

This post is adapted from Malchik's upcoming book,
[A Walking Life: Reclaiming Our Health and Our Freedom One Step at a Time.](#)

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