

**JANUARY 2012**

**CLICKTIVISM**

**PATRICK HAYES**



**DEBATING MATTERS**  
**TOPIC**  
**GUIDES**

[www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

**MOTION:**

**“SOCIAL MEDIA IS  
REJUVENATING  
POLITICAL PROTEST”**

# CONTENTS

**Introduction**

**Key terms**

**The clicktivism debate in context**

**Essential reading**

**Backgrounders**

**Organisations**

**In the news**

## KEY TERMS

Social Media

# INTRODUCTION

1 of 7

# NOTES

1  
1  
2  
4  
5  
5  
6

Over the past five years the rapid rise of social media - the use of internet and mobile technology to engage in an interactive exchange with others [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)] - has been hailed as being as much of a revolutionary force as the birth of the printing press in 1440 [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. In September 2011, Twitter announced it had over 100 million active worldwide users [Ref: [Guardian](#)] and growth rates even exceeding Facebook, which some predict may hit the one billion user mark before too long [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]. The rise of social media has coincided with a resurgence of protests worldwide, from unprecedented upheavals in the Arab World to the 'Indignados' protests in Madrid and Athens and the rise of the Occupy movement. Unsurprisingly, some have attempted to draw a correlation between the two – suggesting that the use of social media by protesters is driving a new era of political protest [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. The uprising in Egypt was widely described as a 'Twitter Revolution' [Ref: [Atlantic](#)] and a new generation of social media activists, dubbed 'Clicktivists', are seen to be increasingly influential in the UK [Ref: [Evening Standard](#)]. Is social media just another means to communicate – a modern and efficient form of post and telephone - or something different in kind?

That social media is being heavily used by protesters to communicate is without question, but the extent to which it is genuinely rejuvenating political protest has been challenged. Is it not, some argue, other factors such as responses to the recession and political repression that remain the key driving force? [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Others say, however, that social media is allowing what may previously have remained personal gripes to be transformed by allowing much greater opportunities for individuals to find others to share their concerns, which has already led to major changes in government policy [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. Critics would argue, however, that political protest is not just a numbers game; simply clicking 'like' on a Facebook campaign page hardly constitutes meaningful political engagement [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Mechanisms such as Twitter, which allows just 140 characters per tweet, could also potentially hinder serious, substantial political debate. Far from rejuvenating political protest, are social media promoting a hollowed out form of political engagement?



### A social revolution or just the latest technology?

The sight of protesters tweeting from their smart phones on demonstrations is now commonplace, with social media used to play a role in avoiding the police ‘kettling’ technique in the 2010 student protests [Ref: [ZDNet](#)]. The Occupy movement notoriously began as a lone ‘hashtag’ on Twitter and, within weeks, became a reality with individuals camping out near the financial hub, which in turn sparked copycat protests around the world [Ref: [Reuters](#)]. The Arab Spring saw Facebook and Twitter heavily used by a new generation of young protesters to organise [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. As author Heather Brooke puts it, ‘Whereas before, they might have felt alone in having those concerns, instead, through social networking, they could band together and find out that they all share these concerns before starting to organise’ [Ref: [Wired](#)]. Surely, some argue, this shows the extent to which social media is a powerful driving force of today’s political protests? Not so fast, say others, people have already found ways of communicating ideas – through leaflets, word of mouth, and traditional media – social media may be a catalyst, but it is not different in kind. The impact of Twitter on the Arab Spring may instead reflect the self-aggrandising nature of the ‘Twittering Class’ in the West, who like to think they played an important role [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Moreover, when Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak shut down the entire internet in Egypt, the Arab Spring wasn’t put on ice – rather people found alternatives which, according to some reports, even made the protests more effective [Ref: [Atlantic](#)].

### Radical force or antisocial network?

The UK’s so-called ‘Blackberry riots’ of summer 2011 offered a reminder for some of the distinctions between social and political unrest [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Even if social media is a useful tool in organising protests, does it risk downplaying the politics in the process? Micah White from Adbusters – which began the Occupy movement – claims ‘Clicktivists are to blame for alienating a generation of would-be activists with their ineffectual campaigns that resemble marketing’ [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Some claim social media are weakening social and political bonds [Ref: [New Yorker](#)] and ‘flattening people out’ [Ref: [NY Review of Books](#)]. Others praise the democratising nature of the internet, which erodes old hierarchies and prevents authoritarian leaders from emerging [Ref: [Wired](#)] enabling a more popular engagement in politics than ever. Far from weakening social bonds, says BBC Newsnight’s Paul Mason, social media is ‘expanding the power of the individual’ in unprecedented ways. Blogger Laurie Penny praises the web for ‘slowly effecting a shift in the way in which politics is understood across the world, and in the relationship between governments and citizens’ [Ref: [Prospect](#)]. Critics disagree, arguing social media may be useful in telling people to do things, but less so in ‘figuring out what those friends should do’ [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. In celebrating Clicktivism, ‘the power of ideas, or the poetry of deeds, to enact social change’ is often ignored [Ref: [Guardian](#)] with people thinking the ‘freedoms previous generations had to fight for are now to be won with a click of a mouse’ [Ref: [Standpoint](#)]: a passive form of political action dubbed ‘Slacktivism’ [Ref: [New Statesman](#)].

### A forum for debate or intolerant arena?

Twitter CEO Dick Costolo has referred to Twitter as the 'free speech wing of the free speech party', giving an open platform for campaigners to express their views, anonymously should they so choose to [Ref: [Wall Street Journal](#)]. US foreign secretary Hilary Clinton has praised the power of the internet to 'put these tools in the hands of people around the world who will use them to advance democracy and human rights' [Ref: [Foreign Policy](#)]. But others say that the transparency of social media could actually lead to a clamping down on, rather than rejuvenation of, protest. Protest groups are heavily monitored by police, which led to the pre-emptive arrests of nearly 200 EDL members on Armistice Day in 2011 [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]. In other countries, authorities monitor social media to identify and arrest political dissidents in 'Cyber crackdowns' [Ref: [France 24](#)]. Furthermore, there is the question of whether the fast interactivity of social networks is conducive to the kind of open political debate associated with protest movements of the past. While blogger Sunny Hundal praises the 'people power' of Twitter campaigns against 'offensive' comments by the likes of journalist Jan Moir [Ref: [Guardian](#)], others are concerned that 'Twitter can be a remarkably conformist, elitist and intolerant arena' [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] which hardly fosters an atmosphere of free speech or thought. While the anonymity afforded by social media may make it easier to organise protest and express controversial opinions freely, there is also the risk that the same lack of accountability makes the engagement with ideas and politics consequently less serious. As influential author Evgeny Morozov questions, 'What if the liberating potential of the Internet also contains the seeds of depoliticisation and thus

dedemocratisation?' [Ref: [New York Times](#)]

## ESSENTIAL READING

A single Twitter hashtag started the 'Occupy' protest that circled the globe

Reuters 19 October 2011

We need a serious critique of net activism

Cory Doctorow *Guardian* 25 January 2011

Tunisians don't need advice from the Twittering classes

Brendan O'Neill *spiked* 18 January 2011

Twitter and Facebook cannot change the real world, says

Malcolm Gladwell

Tim Adams *Observer* October 3 2010

## FOR

Interview with Heather Brooke: The revolution will be digitised

Katie Scott *Wired* 18 August 2011

From Paris to Cairo, these protests are expanding the power of the individual

Paul Mason *Guardian* 7 February 2011

The Twitter mob rules, OK?

Sunny Hundal *Guardian* 19 January 2010

The Twitter Revolution: more than just a slogan

Clay Shirky *Prospect* 6 January 2010

Three cheers for the internet

Laurie Penny *Prospect* 16 December 2009

4 of 7

NOTES

## AGAINST

Facebook doesn't cause riots – or revolutions

Brendan O'Neill *Telegraph* 25 August 2011

Friends in Revolution

Tina Rosenberg *New York Times* 12 July 2011

Small Change, Why the revolution will not be tweeted

Malcolm Gladwell *New Yorker* 4 October 2010

Clicktivism is ruining leftist activism

Micah White *Guardian* 12 August 2010

The revolution will not be tweeted

Andrew Gilligan *Spectator* 17 April 2010

## IN DEPTH

Social media and the Wall Street protests

*Economist* 11 October 2011

Social Media: The people formerly known as the audience

*Economist* July 7 2011

The truth about Twitter, Facebook and the uprisings in the Arab world

Peter Beaumont *Guardian* 25 February 2011

A Twitter Revolution for Journalists

Joel Simon *Huffington Post* February 14 2011

Is the internet a tool of tyranny?

Nick Cohen *Standpoint* December 2009

## BACKGROUNDEERS

Clarkson's just Clarkson – would you have cared, pre-YouTube and Twitter?

Padraig Reidy *Guardian* 1 December 2011

How Syrian Protesters Are Using the iPhone to Fuel an Uprising

John Paul Titlow *Read Write Web* 18 November 2011

Twitter CEO Costolo on Apple, Privacy, Free Speech and Google

Amir Elfrati *Wall Street Journal* 18 October 2011

Clicktivism's assault on dictators, politics and NGOs

Duncan Geere *Wired* 23 June 2011

Why Twitter's media critics are missing the point

Shane Richmond *Telegraph* 16 June 2011

Arab revolt: social media and the people's revolution

*Channel 4 News* 25 February 2011

The Clicktivists - a new breed of protesters

Ben Bryant *Evening Standard* 19 January 2011

Internet activism: for and against

*New Statesman* 8 January 2011

What do social media and the printing press have in common?

Jenny Darroch *Huffington Post* 1 October 2009

Social Media webpage

*Guardian*

5 of 7

NOTES



### RECOMMENDS:

'Life in a Day' (12), 2011

'The Social Network', (12) 2010

Find out more our partnership with the education charity

FILMCLUB, how you can bring the power of films into your

school debates, and this autumn's recommendations from the

FILMCLUB team for Debating Matters!

### ORGANISATIONS

38 Degrees

AdBusters

HM Government ePetitions

Occupy LSX

Wikileaks



### CLICKTIVISM:

"Social media are rejuvenating political protest"



© ACADEMY OF IDEAS LTD 2012

**DEBATING MATTERS**

**WWW.DEBATINGMATTERS.COM**

## IN THE NEWS

6 of 7

NOTES

Why BlackBerry Messenger was rioters' communication method of choice

*Guardian* 7 December 2011

CROSS TALK: Would there have been an Arab Spring without social media?

*Russia Today* 23 October 2011

Social Media Gives Wall Street Protests a Global Reach

*New York Times* 15 October 2011

Twitter reveals it has over 100m users

*Guardian* 8 September 2011

Shedding light on Vodafone's digital darkness

*New Statesman* 23 July 2011

Online Activism Comes Of Age In UK As 38 Degrees Find Their Voice

*Huffington Post* 6 July 2011

Crackdown on cyber activists in Bahrain

*Electron Libre, France* 24 7 April 2011

Protests and the role of social media

*BBC* 28 January 2011

What happens to the Twitter revolution when there is no Internet?

*France 24* 28 January 2011

Online protest: Power to the people?

*Frontline Club* 10 August 2010



## ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas & Pfizer Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

DEBATING MATTERS  
**TOPIC  
GUIDES**

[www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

## FIND OUT MORE

Debating Matters engages a wide range of individuals, from the students who take part in the debates, the diverse group of professionals who judge for us, the teachers who train and support their debaters, and the young people who go on to become Debating Matters Alumni after school and help us to continue to expand and develop the competition. If you enjoyed using this Topic Guide, and are interested in finding out more about Debating Matters and how you can be involved, please complete this form and return it to us at the address below.

Debating Matters Competition  
Academy of Ideas Ltd  
Signet House  
49-51 Farringdon Road  
London  
EC1M 3JP

- Yes, I'd like to know more. Please send me further information about the Debating Matters Competition:
- I am a teacher and would like further details about events in my area and how to enter a team
- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
- I am interested in becoming a Debating Matters judge
- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
- Other (please specify)

First name

Surname

School/company/  
organisation

Professional role  
(if applicable)

Address

Postcode

Email address

School/work phone

Mobile phone



**“DEBATING MATTERS  
TEACHES A WAY  
OF THINKING.  
INTELLECTUAL  
ARCHITECTURE  
IS CREATED BY  
ENGAGING WITH  
IDEAS”**

**TRISTRAM HUNT, HISTORIAN & BROADCASTER**