

Protests driven by tech and social media

It's 2014 in Mexico and Jorge Ríos, Diego García and Roberto Betancourt have created Bidgefy. It's a clever messaging app available for Android and iOS that allows users to communicate via a mesh network that sends messages over Bluetooth.

The idea was sparked by a tech competition in the US, one which the founders were travelling to when they conceived the project. The most unique aspect about communicating through Bridgefy is its mesh network. A mesh network works by connecting devices with one another, opposed to a device connecting to a single WiFi network and only having connectivity when close to that network. This allows devices to work together to provide internet coverage over a wide area. The basic concept: digital communication without the internet.

The app has risen in usage since the Hong Kong protests as in many ways, the messaging app mirrors the way in which protesters are working with each other. It also means that message interception can only happen if you are close to the mesh network, making it a fantastic way to transfer messages regarding anti-government protests without them being seen by the wrong people.

Social media and the Libyan Revolution

This isn't the first time that determined citizens have turned to digital

communication tools to gather and organise anti-government demonstrations. In February 2011, the Libyan Revolution, a part of the Arab Spring, was centred around an uprising against the leadership of Muammar Gaddafi. On Tuesday, 15 February 2011, the protests spread throughout the entire country and were a battle between those for and those against Gaddafi. The protests even led to international military intervention and civil war throughout the whole country. How did they grow so big and so fast? Social media.

During the protests, people on both sides turned to social media to organise demonstrations as well as raise awareness for their stance on the government. It was a tool prevalent during the entire Arab Spring. During the protests in the Libyan uprising, Muammar Gaddafi warned his citizens against using Facebook, highlighting it as a clear threat to retaining his order within the country. Some protesters using Facebook to organise their activities at the time, were, of course, arrested.

Facebook was founded in February 2004 in California, but it wasn't until December 2009 that the social networking site, and later app, started to become the colossal part of how we socialise online that it is today. As it was then that Facebook reached 350 million users altogether and 132 million unique monthly users each month. It was the biggest digital social platform in the world.

This year, however, it became clear that using Facebook for organising mass anti-government protests and demonstrations was probably a bad idea because Facebook was watching everything that we do. All too alarmingly manifesting Orwell's infamous 1984, in 2018, The Guardian revealed just how much data Facebook has on us and it's pretty much everything we've ever done online, ever.

Last year, Facebook even went as far as to label users as being 'interested in treason' (over 65,000) based on their actions using the platform in Russia. Governments the world over are likely aware of the power and potential the platform has for them to really know their citizens on a more personal level than ever before.

Facebook knows, among other things, every message and file you've ever sent or been sent, every file you've ever sent or been sent, all of the contacts in your phone, your potential interests based on what you've liked, every time you've logged onto Facebook at what time and from where in the world, resulting in hundreds of thousands of word documents of information on one person alone. It's impossible to use social media in the way that the protesters during the Libyan Revolution once did, though, it can still be used to inspire others to take action.

Greta Thunberg and the school climate strikes

Since the Libyan revolution, social media fuelling protests has become quite the trend. The school climate strikes, inspired by Greta Thunberg are an example of how one image can inspire a nation and then the world.

In August 2018 at Thunberg's first strike, she invited her classmates to join her but many refused so she protested alone. However, being part of a generation that is always digitally connected, the young activist posted her solo strike on both Instagram and Twitter, only for it to louden the cause and gain the support of Ingmar Rentzhog, the CEO of We Don't Have Time, a Swedish climate activism startup.

From Rentzhog's social media posts covering the strike, Thunberg gained more and more attention with Swedish financier Sasja Beslik re-tweeting Thunberg's post of her strike to his hundreds of thousands of followers. Three days after her first strike, Thunberg tweeted that "almost 35 people" had joined her this time, but the posts circulating online had reached thousands. "Social media can be very effective in creating movements," Thunberg is quoted as saying at the time.

A year later and her impact is phenomenal, particularly amongst young people. In February 2019, Thunberg's initial strike manifested in hundreds of thousands of children leaving lessons to take to the streets demanding climate action. Demonstrations have also taken place in May of this year and most recently, on Friday 29th November 2019, with over 100 towns and cities across the UK taking part.

Hong Kong protests

In the fast-moving world of tech, something new is always being created and if it's any good, people will utilise it. This is the case now, with Bridgefy playing an instrumental role in this year's immense Hong Kong protests that began by advocating for the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill. The bill which would have allowed criminal suspects in Hong Kong to be tried in mainland China was withdrawn in October after seven months of protests. Though demonstrations still continue as protesters demand amnesty for arrested protesters and the application of universal suffrage, allowing the right to vote to everyone.

This isn't the first time mesh networking has been an obvious albeit unintentional ally in the organisation of protests. During the 2014 Hong Kong protests also known as the Umbrella Revolution, FireChat which was first introduced in March 2014, six months before the revolution, grew in popularity

among protesters due to providing offline messaging. Also using mesh networks, the app allows users to communicate to nearby users and so, the more users in range and available to chat, the further the network is extended. It allowed protesters to talk and organise away from the eyes of the government.

Back to today and it's not only government online tracking that poses a threat to protesters but the government ordered internet outage is also a very real possibility. In November 2019, Iran's government orchestrated an internet blackout following mass public protests ignited by anger at the unaffordable rise in fuel prices. Carrie Lam, Hong Kong's Chief Executive hinted at an internet blackout when she mentioned her willingness to look into using all legal measures that provide a way to stop the violence caused by the protests. This comes after the government requested and had granted an injunction order banning citizens in Hong Kong from circulating, publishing or re-publishing material that incites or encourages violence online.

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Conclusion

So it's no surprise that offline communication app Bridgefy has seen over 60,000 installations recently, predominantly in Hong Kong. Technology defines movements just as movements define technology. This movement is fuelled by communication, and today, communication is no better epitomised than through digital innovations.

Both protesters in the UK and Hong Kong have used digital communication to organise and amplify their message.

Following media interest in how the app has seen a surge in usage among Hong Kong protesters, Bridgefy issued a statement on Twitter:

“A quick reminder that Bridgefy is simply a tool for people to communicate. Although the Bridgefy app

has gone viral due to several political issues, and we're happy to help, we do NOT take sides in any political conflict, nor do we share user information with any organization."

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