

# **The Power of Momentary Communities**

## **Locative Media and (In)Formal Protest**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Technological advancements have always been the harbingers of social change; however, the roles these changes take have varied implications for the populace. In recent years, the application and use of technology have accelerated for the individual and for the authorities. Technology is increasingly used as a method for societal monitoring and control, raising issues over civil liberties and personal freedoms. In this paper I will trace a history of informal protest and “momentary communities” from Rave culture of the 1990s to a non-protest/protest community of FlashMobs in the twenty-first century. Protest movements are reacting to increases in surveillance, infiltration and infringement of civil liberties by utilizing underground methods to achieve their goals. Locative media and the rise of ubiquitous computing have put power into the hands of the many and are being employed to enact protests online and on the streets. New technologies have allowed for new communities to be defined: FlashMobs can be seen as a protest for common space; SmartMobs utilize technology to better organize activist and rights protests. Citizens have new methods to mobilize large groups of people who share a common interest, goal or outlook, creating new “momentary communities.” These new methodologies are stretching the conceptual understanding of social protest and empowering citizens to react against authoritarian controls. This paper will show the power inherent in this new method of social organization and its potential (already under way) for activism and hactivism.

### **INTRODUCTION**

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN the harbingers of social change; however, the roles these changes take have varied implications for the populace. In recent years, the application and use of technology have accelerated for the individual

and for authorities. Technology is increasingly used as a method for societal monitoring and control, raising issues over civil liberties and personal freedoms. As our rights are increasingly eroded under the guise of national security, benign technologies such as cell phones, GPS devices and wi-fi enabled laptops allow for creative methods of social organization. Technology provides citizens with a way to mobilize huge groups of people who share a common interest, goal or outlook, thereby creating new momentary communities. Protest movements are reacting to increases in surveillance, infiltration and infringement of civil liberties by utilizing underground methods to achieve their goals (see Figure 1). These new methodologies are stretching the conceptual understanding of social protest and empowering citizens to react against authoritarian controls. This paper will show the power inherent in this new method of social organization and its potential (already underway) for activism and hactivism. I will start with a discussion of some of the earlier uses of technology for social mobilization and move on to instant communities and more recent trends in the latter half of the paper.



**Figure 1**

*Washington DC, USA, 2005. A father and child protest the War in Iraq by the White House Fence and are moved on by Police.*

**IN THE BEGINNING: THE ILLEGAL RAVE (AKA WAREHOUSE PARTIES)**

One of the earliest examples of the utilization of underground networks to organize forms of social protest was seen in "Rave Culture." Although rave culture was associated with shared musical interests, the organization of dance parties that occurred grew from a growing disillusionment with the restrictions and limitations of legal high street clubs. "Ravers," as they became known, began to take over empty warehouses in urban areas or abandoned fields in rural areas and held their own parties. As these parties were not "legal" (they did not secure licensing agreements etc.), knowledge of venues and times was circulated via underground social networks. In order to avoid detection, this would often take the form of an elaborate chain of events such as distribution of flyers at a particular place and time with a phone number to call on a designated date, which would have a recorded message with details of the location. This circumvention of the legal "entertainment" system was instigated by a lack of representation by mainstream clubs and bars, but was reflective of a growing disillusionment with methods of governance. The very actions of Ravers can be understood as a form of social protest that challenged the established societal norms and created a new community linked by the desire for alternative culture (Jordan 2002, 83). As the activities were illegal (and would often proselytize the use of banned substances, especially the drug Ecstasy), Ravers utilized underground networks in order to connect like-minded individuals and evade the controlling mechanisms of authority. Increasingly Ravers came to view themselves and their community as a movement that sought to instigate social change.

The illegal rave was (is) seen by many participants as an expression of freedom as well as a form of protest. Parties would usually be organized on disused land or in urban environments that were vacant. Many felt that the use of this "waste ground" was a form of economic redistribution and a protest against the excesses of late 1980s consumer culture. Such practices became tied with squatter culture which sought to re-take un-used property for public good and to question the established concept of property ownership. The occupation of private land as well as the blatant disregard for increasingly draconian laws is a very direct protest against societal attitudes. Ravers were increasingly connected as a group of disparate community members, tied together at the moment of the rave. In the early days of rave culture, what drove people to events was not just the drugs, music, and freedom; it was instead a sense of community. In recalling these events, many attendees focus on the "instant community" that would spring up around the rave (Coco 2008). These new forms of community were different from other community affiliations as they were momentary; lasting a day at most, a few hours at the least. And yet to any participant, these communities would be as important as any other community. The individuals became tied together under a group interest, creating a connection and bond while sharing in a localized event.

Eventually the wider public and authorities became aware of these "illegal raves" and after some highly publicized negative events associated with the taking of Ecstasy,

the UK Conservative government passed a new law. The “Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994” (UK Government 1994), also known as the “anti-party” bill, was established to counteract these gatherings and disperse the growing underground community. The law restricted any form of gathering in groups for free where music is played: “This section applies to a gathering on land in the open air of 100 or more persons (whether or not trespassers) at which amplified music is played during the night (with or without intermissions) and is such as, by reason of its loudness and duration and the time at which it is played, is likely to cause serious distress to the inhabitants of the locality” (UK Government 1994). The UK-based activists at Urban75.co.uk summarized the act as: “targeting of peaceful protest, criminalisation of trespass, encroachment on the right to silence, and perhaps most infamously, its section defining rave music as ‘wholly or predominantly characterised by a succession of repetitive beats’” (Merrick 1999). The Criminal Justice bill was updated in 2003 to include the “Anti-Social Behaviour Order,” which was seen once again to target youths and youth crime, although the law covers a wide-variety of acts focused on social order and assembly. In the United States the Supreme Court’s approach was to “delineate a space of protest that retained the protesters’ rights” while “ensuring safety and order... promoting the free flow of traffic on public streets and sidewalks, and...promoting the property rights of all citizens” (Mitchell 2003, 47). This in effect redefined the protest zone. These laws were used effectively by authorities in Seattle during the anti-WTO protests of 1999. Declaring a state of emergency, the Seattle authorities set up a non-protest zone. Anyone within this area was arrested for protesting in a non-designated area: “Mayor Paul Schell issued a Civil Emergency Order creating a militarized zone in an area of two dozen blocks in the core of downtown Seattle... In practice, police prevented anyone who sought to express anti-WTO views from entering or remaining in the zone, even if they lived or worked there” (Anon. 2006). At this point the very nature of organized protest begins to change and evolve.

#### **THE NON-PROTEST, PROTEST COMMUNITY**

The draconian laws in the UK made almost any form of non-sanctioned outside gathering by youths illegal. Naturally, these restrictions failed to prevent the gatherings. But Ravers began to organize differently and more efficiently by employing covert and underground methods of communication. As the Raver movement progressed, newer technologies were incorporated, such as the use of text messaging and websites. The method of dissemination of information became increasingly technological. At first it was flyers in pubs or music stores that you would pick up with a map to the rave. This method was easy for the authorities to discover and close down, especially if you were more urbanized than your comrades in rural locations. With the rise of Internet newsgroups, boards sprang up with hints or clues to where the raves would be held. Often revelers would be told to go to a certain place (store, corner, train station), where

they would be contacted by organizers. If the organizers felt it was too risky on that night, the venue would be moved. By using new technologies the organizers were able to keep a step ahead of the authorities, as it was hard to police the increase in newsgroups, and authorities were behind the technological curve that many Ravers were embracing. In many ways the rave organizers were employing typical “resistance movement” methodologies—establishing code words, distributing secret maps to covert meetings, and relying on the ability to move at a moment’s notice, all the while keeping in touch and updating fellow “protesters” via technological means.

As such, these communities can be understood as protest communities. Through these raves, participants were enacting a form of protest, sometimes knowingly but often unknowingly, against the authorities and social structures of that time. It was in many ways a “conceptual protest”; although not outwardly or consciously fighting authority and asking for political change, by enacting and taking part in an illegal rave, all attendees were forming a protest. Any action that challenges social norms and restrictions can be conceptualized as a form of protest, irrespective of the individual intention. Social theorist Don Mitchell has argued that a homeless person urinating in the street is a form of unconscious protest: “No matter how appalling it might be to argue and struggle in favor of the *right* to sleep on the streets or urinate in an alley, it is even more appalling, given the current ruthless rate in which homelessness is produced, to argue that homeless people should *not* have that right” (Mitchell 2003, 27, italics in original). Following from this conceptualization, Ravers can be seen as enacting a form of protest, whether consciously or unconsciously and as such are seen to be dangerous by those in power. As mentioned previously, this was certainly the case with the passing of the so-called “anti-party bill,” which had much wider ramifications on personal and public freedoms than simply regulating parties.

The Raver movement, a reaction to existing social controls, utilized technology and subterfuge to enact social protest. It showed that, through using different methodologies of protest that did not conform to the expected practice, underground movements could increasingly challenge the established attempts to control social action. It laid the path for other forms of social protest that circumvented not only social control mechanisms, but also the existing concepts of “protest.” These new forms of protest would become increasingly technologically based.

### FLASHMOBS AND SMARTMOBS

Many of the tenets set out by Ravers have been carried on into newer forms of social action. In more recent years, the FlashMob has become a new form of group organization, challenging societal norms and the right to assemble freely. FlashMobs started in New York City in the early 1990s as a pseudo social experiment crossed with a satirical take on Manhattanites’ fascination with being part of “something new,” no matter how pointless it might be (Goldstein 2003). A group of people who might or might not know each

other would communicate via forwarded email or a website (as well as phone or printed media) and receive instruction on what the “FlashMob” would be. The first FlashMob was held in a Manhattan carpet store where the “players” or “mobbers” turned up to ask about a specific carpet. The idea quickly spread internationally, and even though the FlashMob was officially claimed to be dead by its purported founder, the meme has taken root in the international consciousness. YouTube and similar websites are now awash with FlashMob activities, from pillow fights in high streets to apparently “spontaneous” dancing in Paddington train station, London (Anon. 2008).

The FlashMob can be seen to be an enactment of the right to free assembly. Although the act itself may be seen as “fun” or even pointless, at its heart it is about people performing an illegal act. In many locations across the world, the right to collect together as a group in a public space has been increasingly restricted and controlled. In 2005 a peace protester, Maya Evans, was arrested and jailed for reading out the names of the Iraq dead at the war memorial by Downing Street in London (BBC News 2005). The police were able to arrest her because she, a 25-year-old lone female, posed a terrorist threat and because her protest was unapproved. In the UK, due to recent additions to the “anti-party” bill and the addition of the anti-terrorism act of 2001 (UK Government 2001), public congregation without prior approval is now deemed a terror threat: “Armed police will use anti-terrorism powers to ‘deal robustly’ with climate change protesters” (Vidal and Pidd 2007). Increasingly across the globe the concept of what is public and what is private space has become eroded and the commons have come under more and more legislation (Murdock 2001). In the UK, to combat the media-dubbed problems of “Binge-drink Britain,” public spaces (the pedestrian areas outside of pubs or bars) have been given “dispersal area” status: “The 2003 Anti Social Behaviour Act introduced Dispersal Orders (DO) and this provision gave the police, acting in tandem with local authorities, the power to disperse groups of people (two or more) from designated areas for up to 24 hours” (Manchester City Council 2008) (see Figure 2). The concept that any group of three or more persons congregating in a “public” area is a nuisance or that they are “up to no good” is fast becoming part of the public consciousness (see Figure 3).

Clearly these dispersal zones have implications for the right to assembly in public spaces, and these increasingly restrictive measures have necessitated a more flexible method of organizing social action. The FlashMob willfully ignores established laws and, for a short time, can be seen to be enacting a form of protest just by coming together and standing still in a private or public space (a shopping street or shopping mall).

Activists have increasingly utilized the same “flash tactics” for political purposes, creating what Howard Rheingold refers to as the “SmartMob.” These mobs will usually have a defined purpose or cause, tying them more closely to established concepts of social protest but utilizing more contemporary methods of organization. Following on from the immediacy and short-duration of the FlashMob, the SmartMob can be seen to be issue-based, idealist and ultimately intelligent. Increasingly the use of locative



*Figure 2*  
 Portsmouth, England, 2006. Street sign informing public of new “Anti-Social Behaviour Disorder” (ASBO’s) by-laws allowing police to give on-the-spot fines.



*Figure 3*  
 Oxford, England, 2006. Street sign informing public of new by-law legislation of 2004 prohibiting alcohol in certain areas of the city.

media such as cell phones, GPS, wi-fi enabled devices and social networking groups are providing an avenue for the creation and successful organization of SmartMobs (Rheingold 2002). Through such forms of networking, the SmartMob may not just organize in one location or space, but instead could be global in scope and form a larger, purposed intelligence across geographical spaces. These “instant communities” may never meet face to face until the action takes place; as with FlashMob they are ideally a group of strangers who meet to perform a specific act, then disperse, explicitly never meeting up with one another. This form of anonymity can be a useful tool for activism, as any authority would have a hard task to identify ringleaders or organizers in any “mob” such as these. This, in part, is the power of the instant community: it is able to impact, to perform and organize without any of the restrictions associated with hierarchies and group dynamics.

One of the most famous examples of such social organization was seen in the “Battle for Seattle” in 1999. The Direct Action Network established protest SmartMobs to create ad-hoc “leaderless” networks to communicate and keep ahead of the authorities: “The cohesion of the Direct Action Network was partly due to their improvised communications network assembled out of cell phones, radios, police scanners and portable computers” (de Armond 2000). Also utilized in Seattle was another organizational tool, the “TXTMob,” created by an artists’ group to keep protesters on the ground organized (Hirsch). The website and software allowed anyone who signed up to send a text message to a group en masse and therefore reorganize and change collective tactics based on rapidly updated news of police action. Using mobile phones made many protest organizers “invisible” to the police and authorities, just as two-way walkie-talkies had often made them targets. Another instance of the use of technology for protest was in the toppling of the regime of President Estrada in the Philippines (Rheingold 2002, 158). Since citizens were unable to legally organize protests in groups, text messages were sent out and then multiplied through social networks, culminating in a mass instant protest over a million people.

#### **NEW TECHNOLOGIES, NEW COMMUNITIES**

Although the action of an event or mob may be successful, one could argue that the short duration and lack of media attention (or even awareness from the public that they are actually witnessing a protest or activist event) lessen the impact of the action. However, contemporary technologies are increasing the exposure of social protest through a differing style of media consumption. As our technologies have changed, so too has our access to media; the “net generation” no longer looks to the radio and television networks for news, but to websites and aggregators such as Digg.com. It is here that many of the actions and protests will be seen by millions and can perhaps gain support. Access to such dissemination technologies has extended the power of the instant community and circumvented many of the attempts at establishing controls.

Similarly, as recording technology becomes increasingly miniaturized, it opens up the possibility for the surveilled to reflect the monitoring process outwards, watching the watchers. Our participation in and viewing of the media have changed as people are able to record participation in a mob and send video to others worldwide in an instant, effectively globalizing the protest or action immediately. The ability to broadcast without the need for any "traditional media" frees the individual and group forming new associations: "One could imagine each user becoming a broadcasting station unto him or herself, a node in a wider network of communication that the state could not possibly even begin to monitor, much less control" (Rafael 2003).

Locative media are part of the evolutionary process of both the individual and society, providing reflexive avenues for social change. Using locative technologies allows social action to be organized under the radar of governmental control, making it fragmented and harder to suppress. Technologies such as cell phones and GPS units allow for spatialized communication on a large scale whilst resisting traditional organizational structures. With the advent of 3G phone networks, the web is now far more mobile than before, allowing for social network sites such as Facebook or MySpace to realistically join the fray for activists and other groups. There doesn't need to be a central hub or a 'head' to the protest; these are "Flat Hierarchies." They structure involvement in a different way: "Flat networks for co-ordination mean allowing all who want to participate to do so... there is no privileged decision-making point" (Jordan 2002, 70). The event can take place simultaneously across geographical boundaries and yet be joined by these socializing technologies that include those who wish to participate either in different countries or in virtual worlds. The key is in the spontaneity of the action and in its impact: the nature of these technologies is that they are decentralized and diverse. Locative technologies allow for the participants to utilize methods that would restrict and control, and usurp them for social action.

The commonality and wide distribution of these technologies make them appear benign. However, their very status as accepted technology gives them an inherent power. The very consumerism of society that makes mobile phones "necessary" has made them a key "weapon of choice" for those wishing to circumvent traditional policies of denial. One may not bring a camera, video or audio recording equipment to an event or place, but mobile phones that contain video cameras, and increasingly powerful cameras, are acceptable. As the right to photograph or record in public has been eroded globally using the banner of "the war on terror," technology has allowed many to record acts against citizens as proof of oppression and keep ahead of those who would wish to deny us our rights or freedoms. As the technology evolves, the gap between computer and person will decrease; already people in the UK have suggested that being without a mobile phone is a traumatic experience (BBC News 2008). The technology has become an extension of the self: it is portable, personal and everywhere. And it is this very ubiquity that allows for them to be useful to those who wish to exercise their rights and freedoms.

Phones can easily be re-chipped, repurposed, and cast aside if required. Many people would question the wisdom of discarding a laptop, but fewer would hesitate to discard a pay-as-you-go phone.

As technology becomes increasingly ubiquitous and “everyware” (Greenfield 2006), it extends our options for creative social mobilization across conceptual and physical geographies. In addition to mass-events, locative media can also be used to subvert the protest process by infusing social discontent randomly throughout daily life. In my ongoing work “Protest Cell,” participants become linked in a networked community through the process of spontaneous individual but linked action(s). The concept behind the project is to enact a protest anywhere you can get mobile phone reception, integrating a protest statement into your immediate surroundings. Protest Cell will allow people to protest anywhere by the action of receiving a phone call. The Protest Cell website will allow anyone to download “protest” ringtones, which could be the names of the dead in Iraq, or a listing of Halliburton’s illegal actions, and so on. The action is in allowing one’s self to be open to phone calls and thus the caller essentially activates the process. It could be organized or completely random, depending on your own personal choice. It provides individuals with another avenue to question and circumvent government disciplinary control systems. Protest Cell will allow people to perform protests in areas of non-protest like government buildings or university areas not designated for “free speech.” Every call is a mini-protest and people can easily group together and create “call-ins” in areas of high traffic, effectively creating a “phone-mob.” As the action is not directly instigated by the participant, a new form of democratized protest is created which sits outside the current control mechanisms regulating public freedoms. This project begins to blur the line between performative art and passive protest, forming new links across conceptual media-based societies.

## CONCLUSION

Semi-structured and spontaneous forms of social expression create new momentary communities that challenge our existing bounded concepts of “community.” New connections are forged between seemingly disparate groups through processes such as flashmobbing and mobile-phone SMS texting utilizing the internet-generation mindset of organization. Such conceptual communities unite (sometimes fleetingly) under a shared connection, which may have numerous purposes: artistic, activist or communitarian. This redefines the concept of resistance to one that acknowledges the possibility to enact change on the “capillaries of power” (Foucault 1995). Such spontaneous communities challenge the normative view of individualization and provide the means to (re)create societies along alternative pathways. Works such as Protest Cell, TXTMob and SmartMobs reconfigure protest, activism and dissent in increasingly creative ways, providing a medium for recapturing individual and social rights. Locative media devices and ubiquitous computers can be repurposed outside of

their commoditized forms to become a vehicle for social change. There is promise that in the intersection between technology and social networking, where these mobs were born, new forms of social interaction and political action can take place. Phones and the Internet, unlike the passive medium of television, are both used actively and could potentially bind us more closely together. Our society is in a period of ongoing social experimentation, and we may be inventing the technological building blocks of new social connections. Further, one can argue that that every action you take as an aware individual is a political act, be it online, at a rave or answering the phone.

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