

# TXTmob: Text Messaging For Protest Swarms

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes cell phone text messaging during the 2004 US Democratic and Republican National Conventions by protesters using TXTmob – a text-message broadcast system developed by the authors. Drawing upon analysis of TXTmob messages, user interviews, self-reporting, and news media accounts, we describe the ways that activists used text messaging to share information and coordinate actions during decentralized protests. We argue that text messaging supports new forms of distributed participation in mass mobilizations.

**Author Keywords:** SMS, text messaging, cell phone, activism, political protest.

**ACM Classification Keywords:** H.4.3 Communications Applications, H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Protests during the Democratic and Republican National Conventions (DNC and RNC, respectively) in the United States this past summer were largely organized via “text messaging” – the ability of cell phone users to send and receive brief text messages via short messaging service (SMS). This was due in large part to TXTmob – a text-message broadcast system created by the authors. TXTmob was developed specifically for, and in collaboration with protest organizers, and was enabled both by the widespread adoption of SMS-enabled cell phones among activists and by evolutions in protest tactics. In turn, TXTmob facilitated new social formations and modes of participation.

Drawing upon analysis of TXTmob messages, user interviews, self-reporting, and news media accounts, we describe the ways that activists used TXTmob to share information and coordinate actions. This paper draws upon prior work in text-messaging [10] and the use of mediated communications by political activists [6]. We extend current research with new empirical data and insight into the dynamics of how cell phones and text messaging are transforming large-scale public expression of dissent.

Prior use of SMS during mass mobilizations has been largely “viral” in nature, consisting primarily of individuals and small groups sending and forwarding messaging among pre-existing social networks [5]. Research on SMS use by protesters has focused on well-publicized spontaneous popular uprisings in the Philippines [13] and Spain, and has been limited to general descriptions of emerging social structures [12], particularly “smart mobs” [15].

Unlike the protests in Manila and Madrid, the mass mobilizations against the DNC and RNC were neither spontaneous nor unexpected. Activists and law enforcement officials alike had planned and trained for months in anticipation of open conflict in the streets of Boston and New York. Accordingly, text messaging was part of a broader communications strategy developed by organizers, and was put to a wider variety of uses than simply getting bodies into the street.

## 2. SWARMING

Street protest has evolved significantly over the past several decades. Perhaps the most significant development has been the tactic of coordinating actions by decentralized, autonomous groups. This strategy, known among military theorists as “swarming”, is described as the dispersion of command among many small, autonomous units that are able to collectively “attack an enemy from all directions” [4]. Swarming has been used to describe the J18 (June 18) actions that occurred in cities across the globe and paralyzed central London in 1999, as well as demonstrations that shut down a WTO meeting in Seattle later that same year.

After the J18 and Seattle protests, law enforcement has adopted a more aggressive approach to crowd control during large-scale demonstrations. Independent observers have come to call the current strategy “The Miami Model”, named for its use during protests against the 2003 Free Trade Areas of the Americas (FTAA) summit. The Miami Model has been described as “the criminalization of dissent,” [11] and is characterized by restricting public access to large parts of the city, pre-emptive arrests of activist “leaders,” widespread use of nonlethal weapons including tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets [16], and the use of mass arrests or “sweeps” that often includes the detention of law-abiding citizens who are later released without charge [14].

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The Miami Model in turn has prompted further decentralization among activists. The response by organizers to the consolidation of law enforcement resources around the convention venues was to distribute the sites of dissent throughout the city in order to “transform the streets... into stages of resistance and forums for debate” [1]. Motivated both by a need for inclusive strategies that “allow for a full spectrum of tactics and messages” [3] and a recognition that successful tactics from Seattle and J18 are no longer effective, activist groups like the Bl(A)ck Tea Society (BTS) in Boston and a31 Action Coalition (a31) in NYC instead chose to decentralize both the activist networks and targets. Rather than attempting a blockade of the RNC venue, for example, a31 instead suggested various “protest locations” including delegate hotels, government and corporate office buildings, and RNC event locations.

This approach was most effective in New York. Among the successful actions was a “Mouse Bloc” (named for the Disney Corporation’s venerable mascot) that confronted delegates exiting Broadway shows, a “Man in Black Bloc” to reclaim the memory of Johnny Cash at a delegate event hosted by Sotheby’s auction house, and a “Shut-Up-Athon” in which hundreds of participants repeated shouted “Shut the FOX UP!” outside the Fox Television studios.

### 3. TXTmob: TEXT MESSAGING FOR PROTEST SWARMS

Swarming depends on communications infrastructure [4]. The ability of autonomous and semi-autonomous groups to coordinate actions is directly related to their ability to share information.

We faced several challenges in developing a communications system for the decentralized actions envisioned by the BTS and a31 coalition. Previous demonstrations have relied on “comms” groups – networks of activists who are in constant communication with each other via 2-way radios, and who keep others informed via word of mouth. Recognizing the importance of information sharing in previous actions, police have attempted to disrupt communication networks by interfering with activist broadcasts and by arresting comms group members [7].

Spreading actions across an entire city would create too large a territory for comms groups to manage, even if we could find enough 2-way radios to equip them. We also recognized that anyone who could easily be identified as part of the comms system would be subject to arrest. Finally, we were concerned about attempts by law enforcement and right-wing sympathizers to disrupt any system we set up.

Text messaging seemed an ideal broadcast medium for several reasons. The ubiquity of cell phones makes them relatively inconspicuous devices, meaning that a cell phone user would not immediately be identified as part of a comms network. Widespread cell phone adoption also meant that the comms network could be expanded hundreds of activists

without requiring the purchase of expensive radio technology. Finally, SMS is a technology that is widely used by many social sectors and relies on robust networks that are controlled by large corporations. As such, they are not easily jammed or otherwise disrupted [8].

TXTmob was first deployed several days before the DNC. The initial prototype featured a website that allowed users to join broadcast channels and to send simple text messages. A second prototype that allowed users to send messages directly from their phones was launched a month later, shortly before the RNC. The current prototype also supports phone-based administration of user accounts. Out of concern for misuse by spammers, TXTmob is maintained as an opt-in service and requires users to verify cell phone ownership.

### 4. USE ANALYSIS

TXTmob was designed as a flexible tool to support a variety of needs. Users who created their own groups could choose whether membership was open (public) or closed (private); they could also specify whether any member could send messages (unmoderated) or whether messaging was limited to privileged users (moderated). This allowed four major types of configurations allowing a range of uses (Figure 1).

The following analysis describes the major patterns of use that emerged. 5459 people registered with TXTmob during the conventions. 1757 messages were sent among 322 mobs. Message content, mob description, and timestamp data was considered in the analysis; neither cell phone nor user data was examined. Data about user experience with TXTmob was collected via informal interviews with approximately 37 TXTmob users, and through “report-back” email messages submitted by 113 users. Press reports about the TXTmob from mainstream and independent media sources were also analyzed.

	public	private
moderated	<b>comms</b> <b>flashmobs</b>	<b>dispatch</b>
unmoderated	<b>meetup</b> <b>open forums</b>	<b>closed forums</b>

Figure 1: models of use according group structure.

#### 4.1 Moderated, public groups

“Flash mobs” were a short-lived fad in which people used email to coordinate semi-spontaneous public performances involving dozens of strangers in coordinated acts that resembled absurdist theater. When Flash mobs burst upon the cultural landscape, there was immediate speculation that this

could be a useful tactic for political demonstrations – an observation that riled many organizers who insisted that flash mobs remain apolitical.

During the RNC, several flash mob-type actions were organized. The largest of these was the “a31 street party,” which had 509 members. Organizers notified participants of the time and place minutes before the planned action. TXTmob was subsequently used to coordinate actions by the mob, as evidenced by this series of messages:

- A31 party mtg at 2 spots NW corner of Stuyvesant park, 2nd & 16th and SE corner of Union Sq
- a31 party Penned in b/w irving and 16th. more in next message
- a31 party disperse immediately

Organizers also established “comms” networks – highly structured information dissemination mechanisms aimed at providing reliable information from trusted sources to activists in the street. Both DNC and RNC protest organizers established fairly strict communications protocols. For example, the NYC Comms Collective (NYCC) relied on a network of bicycle-riding lookouts that maintained constant communication via cell phone and 2-way radio. Information was relayed to NYCCC operatives at a secure location, who then broadcast to the 901 registered members of the NYCC mob. Only messages that came from NYCC members or from other trusted sources were broadcast. Messaging was used primarily for sharing actionable information, such as march status, locations of police barricades, and arrest information:

- Police moving fast Westbound on 23 St toward the bike bloc
- War Resisters League March is at Fulton and Church aprox 250 ppl, will leave shortly
- Run against Bush in progress (just went through times sq). media march starts at 7, 52nd and Broadway, NYCC also shared information with other groups like Ruckus Society and Indymedia, who maintained similar distribution channels.

#### 4.2 Unmoderated, public groups

A number of users set up “meetup” groups that provided opportunities for people to coalesce around geography (e.g. “DC folks up in NYC for RNC protests”), ideology (“queerpolitics”), and planned activity (“RNC drummers”). Several “open forums” were also created that facilitated widespread information sharing around various topics (“Use this service to send messages about safety, transportation and housing issues”).

Open forum users monitored police and delegate activity, coordinated movements, and sent messages of support. Remote participants also used these channels to report on media coverage back to activists in the street:

- “CT delegation @ Maison (7th Ave. & 53rd). Outdoor dining area. Try to get people there.”
- “Undecover cops have red/orange handbands. Scooters with plate 52L... - undecover cops.”
- “Front of march: slow down!”
- “1000 protest coffins getting lots of time on c-span. Looks great! Congrats!”

Not surprisingly, open forums encouraged the broadest participation and had the least accurate information. Users adopted several strategies to improve information quality, including citing source, signing messages, and contesting false or inaccurate texts.

#### 4.3 Moderated, private groups

Groups that restricted membership and limited members’ ability to send messages tended to rely on one or more members whose primary responsibility was coordinating communications for the group. Groups of volunteer medics and legal observers often adopted a “dispatch” model, in which messages were sent by operators located safely away from protest activities who monitored a variety of information sources including police scanners, telephone calls, SMS traffic, and internet, television, and radio news.

- 1 medic needed for bioterror: meet 1430 copley w/ Jim#
- people beaten at 42 and 6th
- If anyone sees police van #5305, please call in.
- Video dispatch. Federal agents trailing activists at 6th Ave and 9th St. Situation tense.

#### 4.4 Closed channels (unmoderated private groups)

Several affinity groups set up channels that allowed unrestricted messaging among a limited set of participants. These channels were used to provide logistical information, but also included informal and personal messaging among participations:

- Lisa & i are heading into the city now see yall soon
- Chuck is safe and on the move (6th and 25th). be aware of unmarked scooter cops

#### 5. DISTRIBUTED PARTICIPATION

TXTmob provided an effective means of maintaining “topstight” - “a ‘big-picture’ view of what’s going on” [4]. Activists and journalists depended on TXTmob to build a “mental picture” [9] of actions occurring all over the city [17]. Non-activists also relied on the service to find out about traffic conditions and street closures. Several protesters reported feeling “safer” as a result of their involvement – particularly during large marches. It is assumed that police monitored TXTmob traffic as well.

Providing real-time information to activists in the street allowed fluid, spontaneous actions to occur across the city, and enabled new forms of participation and collaboration among activists. Reports of delegates seen eating brunch in neighborhood restaurants lead to impromptu demonstrations, calls for spontaneous “kiss-ins” gathered hundreds of participants, dissatisfied workers called in sick to join Critical Mass rides [2]. Several users reported spontaneously joining protest actions as a result of receiving TXTmob messages.

Virtually anyone could join the communications network, reporting police, delegate, and activist activity, providing feedback on media coverage, or simply sending messages of support and solidarity:

- Watchin u on cspan- the world hears u loud and clear!
- Go, Go, Go wish we were there Kraash from So Cal.
- 60 protesters at us consulate in madrid... protesting conditions of RNC prisoners

Several users reported signing up to receive TXTmob messages even though they were unable to participate in street actions. While it is easy to dismiss this as voyeurism or participation without risk, we would suggest that something important was going on. It is worth noting that TXTmob was not the only way to follow protest activities; numerous websites (including Indymedia) also provided up-to-the-minute coverage. In addition, SMS is a relatively invasive, expensive medium. The fact that some users chose to receive text messages without any expectation of being able to act on them speaks to the fact that users found such participation meaningful.

Remote users consistently expressed solidarity with protesters, and used the phrase “it felt like being there” to describe their experience. This raises several questions:

1. Does this form of participation constitute a collective identity (a sense of “we-ness” among participants)?
2. If so, is it reciprocated by activists in the street?
3. How does remote identification contribute to the ongoing work of movement-building by activist groups?
4. Is there something unique about mobile devices that enhances such identification (in a way that, say, email or websites don’t).

We look forward to addressing these issues with future work.

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