Social media has already changed how we communicate. Now it’s redrawing the frontiers of research as scientists mine it for clues to our political behavior.

by Lindsy Van Gelder
The **YouTube** clips had an exuberant grit that was part **Occupy Wall Street**, part **Thelma & Louise**. Very few videos actually showed the faces of those defying the Saudi Arabian ban on women driving; more often the camera lingered on an illicit but manicured left hand at the wheel, the sleeves of a black abaya, or dice dangling from the rearview mirror. As the protesters and their friends tooted through traffic—some with rock blasting on the car radio—their excitement was palpable. “We’re doing it—yes, we are!” piped up a voice from the passenger seat in one clip, breaking into gleeful English. Dozens of videos were quickly posted on various Twitter feeds: #Women2Drive, #Oct26driving, and #FreeTarikAlMubarak. A Saudi-American comic launched a wicked Bob Marley video parody called “No Woman, No Drive,” which went cross-platform viral. Then, just days before the demonstration, Robin Morgan, host of the American feminist podcast **Women’s Media Center Live**, received a private email from a dispirited organizer. Saudi clerics had long condemned women behind the wheel, and in September darkly warned that driving damage ovaries and cause birth defects. In the past, the ban had been more a matter of religious custom than of civil law. Previous demonstrations had resulted in punishments ranging from women being escorted home and made to sign pledges that they wouldn’t drive again to drivers (and their husbands) being banned from foreign travel for a year, denounced by name from pulpits across the country, and fired from government jobs.

Now there was a serious new wrinkle: The Ministry of the Interior had threatened to jail anyone who attempted to “disturb the public peace” by driving or even supporting the campaign online. Many worried it might now be considered treason, a capital crime. The Saudi organizer told Morgan that the government’s escalation was “the worst blow ever for the Saudi women’s rights movement during the last 30 years.” Her compatriots were “devastated”—so much so that they were considering canceling the drive-in. Morgan is a veteran activist—she organized the first feminist protest against the Miss America Pageant in 1968—and recently collaborated with the Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute, active Telecommunications Program and its **Active Media** project. “This stuff is the dark matter of the effects of the Internet on society. “For instance, when the Red Shirts [United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship] took over downtown Bangkok [in 2010], they used YouTube to document it, but the actual coordination was much more tied to texting.”

“If a text falls in the e-forest, and academia can’t read it, does it exist? Maybe not, pedagogically speaking—but then there’s Twitter.”

“In Twitter, the idea is that you’re a little website, a microblog that people can surf—that’s the beauty of it,” says Richard Bonneau, associate professor of biology and computer science. Very few people tweet privately, Bonneau points out. (A 2012 survey by the social media monitoring software company Beboke showed that almost 90 percent of Twitter accounts were set to go out to the general public; a survey earlier that year of the newest 100 million accounts by the online statistical company Twopcharts indicated that the tendency to go public was steadily increasing, with only 2.3 percent of new users protecting their privacy.) There is a great deal of other information that is not proprietary, although it often requires algorithms and large servers to culi...
Tucker, the professor of politics and Russian at NYU/Abu Dhabi. Undergraduates will study the Facebook pages of members of Congress, for example, and then go to Washington to interview their office staffs about their social media practices.

Tucker, the politics and Russian and Slavic studies professor, likes to note that for most of his career, his findings could be contained in an Excel spreadsheet. “Previously, our best sources of data were that we might get a thousand or 2,000 people an hour’s worth of questions, and if we actually got to go back to those people a year later, that would be amazing data. And if you could do that in 10 countries—well, there were only five to 10 data sets like that out there. And now, all of a sudden, we have millions of people in every country in the world talking multiple times a day and leaving behind digital records of what they’re saying.”

Even if only a small percentage of it is about issues of governance, he says, “it completely dwarfs what we’ve ever known about what individuals are saying about politics.”

Online extras: Some crimes that play out on social media are distressingly personal. Read the companion piece, “Thickle Lip Texts,” at nyu.edu/alumni.magazine.

“One thing that always surprises me online is how much people are willing to share.” They share their thoughts about everything—what they eat, what they’re doing, when they’re hanging out with friends. But it’s great from a researcher’s perspective.

SMaPP has also analyzed and charted the vocabulary tweeted by members of Congress (the researchers estimate that 96 percent of senators and representatives who have served in the current Congress have Twitter accounts). In general, Nagler says, congressional members haven’t yet figured out how to use the interactivity of social media to raise participation or otherwise involve voters; mostly they tweet some version of “You’re doing a great job,” “Thank you,” or “bipartisan.” There was one telling exception: a word cloud chart showing the tweets of those Republicans who eventually voted to end the shutdown looks virtually identical to that of the Democrats.

Another ongoing SMaPP focus is measuring how information changes over time—for instance, how quickly tragedies involving firearms devolve into political polarization. “It took about 20 days for the Newtown shootings to get heavily polarized,” Nagler says, “although to put it in perspective, it never got as polarized as tweets about Romney or Obama or the gold standard—tweets about the National Rifle Association.”

But the project is not limited to domestic affairs. When Istanbul exploded in anti-urban development protests over the fate of Taksim Gezi Park last May, SMaPP researchers monitored some 2 million tweets over a 24-hour period. They found another surprise: unlike the Arab Spring, where the whole world was watching (and tweeting), most of the buzz was local. In fact, most tweets were in Turkish, Nagler says, and “a tremendous density of tweets came from inside or around the park.” The researchers believe that what was happening was at least in part a form of citizen journalism, with participants live-streaming and live-blogging their own protest to compensate for the failure of the mainstream Turkish media to cover the story.

At one point, the demonstrators even appealed to their fellow Turks to turn off their televisions in dissent of the slipshod coverage and then publicize their actions with #Bugl on Televisyonlar Kapali (#TurnOffTheTelevisionsToday). Their appeal garnered more than 50,000 tweets.