

FBI raids home over use of Twitter at G20 summit

Ali Ismail

16 October 2009

On October 1, FBI anti-terrorism agents backed by police helicopters raided the Queens, New York, home of Elliot Madison, a self-described anarchist. Madison had been arrested in Pittsburgh a week earlier for using Twitter to pass information between protesters at the G20 summit.

The federal agents in New York confiscated items from Madison's home that included political literature, a picture of Lenin and items of clothing. Madison works as a social worker, and the FBI also seized his clients' case files.

An article in the *New York Times* stated, "A search warrant executed by the FBI at Mr. Madison's house authorized agents and officers looking for violations of federal rioting laws to seize computers and phones, black masks and clothes and financial records and address books." Madison's attorney has since obtained a court injunction against the FBI examining the seized items.

Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* reported the FBI action under the headline "Queens 'terror' raid hits G-20 anarchist."

The raid came a week after Madison and another individual were arrested in Pittsburgh during the G20 summit and charged with "hindering apprehension or prosecution" and "possession of instruments of crime"—a reference to police scanners. According to the Pennsylvania State Police, Madison was found in his hotel room using the social-networking site Twitter to provide information on police movements to protesters during the G20 summit. Police scanners and several computers were also found in his hotel room.

Madison, 41 and a resident of the Jackson Heights neighborhood of Queens in New York, has denied any wrongdoing. While in Pittsburgh, he participated in the Tin Can Communications Collective, a group formed to use social-networking sites to send mass text messages concerning protest-related events.

Madison is believed to be one of the first people in the US to face criminal charges for using a social-networking site to inform protesters about police movements.

Madison's lawyer, Martin Stolar, stated, "He and a friend were part of a communications network among people protesting the G20."

"It's an outrageous use of criminal law to punish dissent, to punish speech, which tends to support dissent, and it is the most unique application of the criminal law to the use of Twitter that I have ever seen," said Stolar.

"Essentially we have Elliot accused of taking publicly available

information and giving it to another person in the public and then being charged with a crime for doing so," he said. "I'm missing something here."

The raid on Madison's home lasted for 16 hours, with helicopters circling the neighborhood. His lawyer described the raid in an interview with *Democracy Now*: "And so, they (FBI and the New York Police Department) rambled around and searched and pulled things. They're not only from Elliot and his wife Elena's property, but also there were other residents of the house who are living there who had their private property taken and swept up in this, including computers and discs of somebody who's making a film, computers and discs of somebody who produced a weekly radio show, a computer that actually belonged to the United States Government. One of the residents of the house was a contract employee for one of the federal agencies, and that computer was also taken."

Apparently, agents even seized stuffed animals belonging to Madison. "Yes, yes, and they took Curious George stuffed animals," said Madison. "They took magnets from the refrigerator. They took a needlepoint of Lenin that my wife's grandmother had made, a whole variety of bizarre things that they've taken." Of the books that were seized, Madison said, "I'm an author. I've written fiction. I've written lots of nonfiction. I'm an anarchist, so I've written lots of political works. So they not only grabbed all of my works, they grabbed anything that they felt like grabbing from our pretty large library."

No additional federal charges have been filed against Madison since the raid. What was seized from his home had nothing to do with the laws he was alleged to have violated in Pittsburgh. On October 2, Madison's attorney argued in a federal court in Brooklyn that the charges were too vague and overly broad. Judge Dora L. Irizarry ordered authorities to desist from examining the seized material until October 16, pending further orders.

Legal experts have warned that the prosecution of Madison has far-reaching implications for the freedom of speech and basic democratic rights.

Vic Walczak, the legal director of the ACLU of Pennsylvania, stated, "In this age of instant media coverage it has the potential to chill live reporting. This is just the rebroadcasting of information that's otherwise publicly available, not too different from what the media were doing."

Protesters around the world have utilized social-networking sites to inform people about planned rallies and to spread word on

arrests and police movements. According to the *Times*, “American protesters first made widespread use of mass text messages in New York, during the 2004 Republican National Convention, when hundreds of people used a system called TXT mob to share information. Messages, sent as events unfolded, allowed demonstrators and others to react quickly to word of arrests, police mobilizations and roving rallies. Mass texting has since become a valued tool among protesters.”

In reporting the arrests and FBI raid, the US mass media has exhibited none of the concern for democratic rights that it has proclaimed in relation to similar acts of repression in other countries.

US officials and media commentators heaped praise on the so-called “Twitter Revolution” in Iran during the protests staged following the victory of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over his challenger, Mir Hossein Mousavi, this past summer.

“Has Twitter become the CNN of the masses?” asked Howard Kurtz on CNN. “This revolution will not be televised, but it is definitely being tweeted,” said Rachel Maddow of MSNBC.

Such praise for the use of the social-networking service reflected Washington’s backing for the Mousavi camp, which it sees as more amendable to US strategic interests in the region and more likely to open up the Iranian market to US capital. It was for this reason that the Obama administration supported the pro-Mousavi protests.

The White House’s own Twitter feed read, “We call on the Iranian government to stop all violent and unjust actions against its own people.”

When Iranian officials blocked protesters’ access to Twitter, US officials expressed outrage over the action. Senators Charles Schumer (Democrat-New York) and Lindsey Graham (Republican-South Carolina) wrote: “Following recent elections, the Iranian government has used a new communications monitoring center to interfere with and suppress Internet and cell phone communications as part of efforts to crack down on Iranian citizens peacefully demonstrating...including voice calls, e-mail, text messaging, instant messages, and web traffic as well as posts to social-networking sites such as Twitter, MySpace and Facebook.”

The US State Department even pressured Twitter to delay a previously planned upgrade that would have temporarily cut service to Iran. On October 11, just weeks after Madison’s arrest, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton admitted to CNN’s Christiane Amanpour that the State Department contacted Twitter to convince them not to shut their site down for 48 hours as they had planned.

Human rights activists and the American Civil Liberties Union have pointed to the hypocrisy of the US government in its dealings with protests within the country, as opposed to its support in other countries for protests that serve US state interests. The Pennsylvania ACLU’s Vic Walczak told *Reuters*, “The same conduct (of authorities) in Iran or China during recent demonstrations would be called human rights violations whereas here it’s called necessary crime control. It’s a real double standard.”

The US actually was largely silent when China recently blocked access to Twitter before the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen

Square massacre and last July in response to ethnic unrest in northwestern Xinjiang. The American silence on China’s Twitter crackdown can be explained by the fact that any sort of social uprising in China would negatively affect US interests in that country.

The arrest and criminal charging of Elliot Madison was explicitly political. Commenting on the real police motive in arresting him, Madison said, “I think what’s very interesting in all these stories about me is that the Tin Can Communications Collective was one Twitter feed. I have found that there were at least 24 Twitter feeds going on, everywhere from the police to the G20 to Ron Paul supporters. Everybody had their own Twitter feeds going on. They decided to criminalize me I think, because of the fact that we were in solidarity with the protesters.”

The protesters in Pittsburgh were kept far away from the actual summit meeting. The number of protesters was relatively small, and their actions were overwhelmingly peaceful. Nevertheless, Pittsburgh police, backed by riot squads brought in from other parts of the country, brutally suppressed the protests using batons, rubber bullets, and OC gas. Sound cannons that had previously been used by the US military in suppressing opposition to the occupation in Iraq were turned against protesters in the US for the first time.

The arrests for the use of Twitter in Pittsburgh and the subsequent police-state raid on the home of Elliot Madison set a dangerous precedent and are an ominous sign of things to come. The only logic behind the criminal prosecution of Madison is that in informing protesters about police movements, his communications interfered with their being beaten and arrested—that is, with the unconstitutional suppression of their right to assemble and express their views.

The use of the FBI in pursuing this prosecution makes it clear that under the Obama administration the introduction of police-state methods is not only continuing but accelerating.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact