

# Chicago asked not to stifle wireless at summits

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In this Oct. 23, 2011 file photo, a protester is photographed by Chicago police after his arrest at an Occupy Chicago march and protest in Grant Park. Chicago Alderman Ricardo Munoz is expected to introduce on Wednesday, Feb. 15, 2012, an ordinance that would prohibit the city's police department from cutting off access to cell phone networks and social media sites during the G-8 and NATO summits in the city in May 2012. Munoz says the summits are a chance to show the best of Chicago off to the rest of the world, and that should include our commitment to civil rights and our democratic right to protest. (AP Photo/Paul Beaty, File)

(AP) -- Protesters are coming by the thousands to Chicago, armed with smartphones, video cameras and social media links that will allow them to instantly map strategy, share plans and disseminate images of what's happening - right in front of a police force renowned for responding with tough tactics.

Now a city councilman wants to forbid the [Police](#) Department from pulling the plug on all that [electronic communication](#) during the G-8 and NATO summits in May, taking away a tactic employed by authorities during a crackdown on democratic protests in Egypt but also in the [San Francisco Bay Area](#) during protests there last year.

"We're putting down a marker and saying, this has happened in other places and we don't even want it considered here," said Alderman Ricardo Munoz, who will propose his anti-crackdown ordinance at a Chicago City Council meeting Wednesday.

Munoz said he has no indication that police are contemplating shutting down cellphone use or [social media](#) sites. And aides to Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Police Chief Garry McCarthy say the leaders have no plans to put any restrictions on social media or other communications.

But Munoz's determination to take the tactic off the table is an acknowledgement that the front line at mass protests is increasingly technological as officials and protesters search for a balance between security and [freedom of speech](#). It also illustrates a growing nervousness about clashes during the summits in a city that just last week agreed to pay more than \$6 million to hundreds of protesters for wrongful arrests by police during a 2003 [Iraq War](#) demonstration.

"Chicago has a painful history going back to the Red Squad and 1968," said Munoz, referring to a police intelligence unit that into the 1970s spied on everyone from anti-war activists to the PTA as well as the still-vivid footage of police beating protesters during the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

In San Francisco last year, transit officials were roundly criticized after cutting off cellphones in subway stations to disrupt planning for a protest over a transit police shooting. Bay Area Rapid Transit officials defended

the action as legal but later passed a policy to allow such a move only in response to extraordinary threats.

BART was the first and only government agency in the U.S. to block electronic communications as a way to quell social unrest, but its ensuing policy was also the only one of its kind, according to Linda Lye, an American Civil Liberties Union attorney

More infamously, the Egyptian government shut down all Internet access last year after demonstrators used social media to coordinate protests and circulate images of brutality in the government crackdown. The move ended up intensifying the protests, and the government eventually fell.

"In this day and age, social media is central to the First Amendment," said Andy Thayer, a Chicago activist who is helping plan the NATO/G8 protests. He said the ability to take photographs and video and post them on the Internet as events unfold is crucial for organizing and to alert the public.

Munoz's ordinance, a draft of which he gave to The Associated Press, explicitly prohibits the police from "shutting down mobile tower communications" during the summits, "using confiscated equipment to monitor or block mobile phone and Web access" and selectively blocking access to the Internet and social media sites.

McCarthy told reporters recently that police will not "do anything about the First Amendment except protect it."

But the City Council recently gave Emanuel extraordinary powers to make decisions regarding the summits in certain circumstances. And a spokeswoman for McCarthy would not say definitively that he wouldn't change his mind about needing to block communications in an emergency.

Blocking cellphone and Web access is both exceedingly simple and complicated - with the physical act of rendering cellphones and other hand-held electronic devices useless being as easy as flipping a switch at a base station of a cellphone tower.

Officials also could use signal jamming devices similar to ones used by the military in war zones.

The legality of such steps isn't always clear, however.

"Under most circumstances they're not allowed to do that, (but) if there is a riot and rioters are burning a building, we don't know whether a temporary shutdown would be constitutional," said Eugene Volokh, a UCLA law professor who specializes in constitutional law and cyber law.

He said things get murky if police tried, for example, to take down a Facebook page where people are exchanging ideas about politics because one person is urging others to throw a Molotov cocktail at a particular building.

But some officers say the city ought not rule out blocking communications if protests get out of hand.

"I'm just concerned about officer safety and citizen safety," said Mike Shields, head of the Chicago Fraternal Order of Police. "... If we have to take this action, if it's within the framework of the Constitution, then we have to consider it."

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