Social Justice Media: the Case of Occupy

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Abstract

Recently, there has been an outburst of academic and journalistic writing about the strategic use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) by social justice movements. However, as Rodríguez et al (2014) have cogently argued[1], these reports have failed to examine the historical development and complexity of communication processes within larger global political economies; and have tended to neglect existing knowledges and literatures, especially from the global south. Using a research rubric drawn from autonomist Marxism, this article takes the Occupy movement as a case study, and examines its historical antecedents, composition of social actors, communications repertoires and strategies of social change. My findings suggest that the Occupy movement was significant, not for its contribution to political change, but for its contribution to democratic communications. Occupy represented a new watershed in social justice communications, in which the movement itself directed its own media, reducing, for a time, the dependency of social justice groups on the dominant commercial media. Using a transmedia approach, beginning with the creation of communications commons in reclaimed public space, the Occupy movement converged many different social justice groups who employed a panoply of old and new communications repertoires. Although the movement itself has faded, its repertoire has been remediated in social justice movement communications practices throughout the world.

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[1] Rodríguez, C., B. Ferron and K. Shamas. (2014) "Four Challenges in the Field of Alternative, Radical and Citizens' Media Research." *Media, Culture & Society*. V*ol. 36, 2: pp. 150-166.*

Introduction

In the last five years, inspired by the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement and similar protests movements around the world, there has been an outburst of academic and journalistic writing about the strategic use of information and communications technologies by social justice movements. However, as Rodríguez et al (2014) have cogently argued, these reports fail to examine several critical dimensions, including the historical development, the complexity of communication processes, and their operation within larger global political economies. In addition, they note, much of this new research boom has neglected existing knowledge and literature within the field of communication and social change.

Fortunately, a growing set of scholars is beginning to provide more comprehensive, holistic and longitudinal approaches from across many different disciplines. J.D. Downing, a long-time researcher of radical media, explicitly designed the *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media* to include historical and contemporary practices, from graffiti to the Internet, and especially from movements of the global south (Downing, 2011:xxv). Cammaerts, Mattoni, and McCurdy, and their associated contributors, bridge the schools of communications and social movements with their volume *Mediation and Protest Movements* (2013)*;* using the theoretical lens of *mediation*, first elaborated by Martín-Barbero, they examine the breadth of participatory social movement media and communication processes and practices. In the same collection, Costanza-Chock underscores the *transmedia mobilization* approach in which movements produce multimodal narratives to create and share content, aggregate, curate, remix and circulate rich old and new media texts to reach and involve diverse audiences among their social, cultural and political networks (2013: 97). In turn, Kavada reminds us to examine the differences among activists and organizations, and how their strategic understandings of social change influences their communications practices (2013).

All of these authors recognize a major change in the political economy of the *media ecology* (Cammaerts et al, 2013:3). The global domination of news and information during the twentieth century by a handful of capitalist corporations, most of which operate from head offices in the global north, is no longer as assured; their commercial success and business models not only contested by an array of capitalist rivals in global

north and south, but by social movement challengers. Since the mid-1990s, social movements have surpassed some of their previous dependency on the dominant commercial media, and have effectively adapted information and communications technologies for their own use. They direct their own media to mobilize communities of support and action, reach out to allies, and broker space in the corporate commercial news media (Hunter et al, 2013).

Social Justice Media

This paper responds to the lead taken by these authors. My own research agenda draws from my own practice and a number of different intellectual disciplines, including, but not limited to autonomist Marxism. Autonomous Marxism has been concerned since the 1970s with mapping the changing political, economic and social relations of struggle, starting from the perspective of working people as subjects, who, although severely constrained by corporate and state regimes of ruling, act to fashion collective projects autonomous of those regimes (Kinsman 2006). I have been using an adapted autonomist research rubric, first developed by *Zerowork* (1975) and more recently adapted by Nick Dyer-Witheford (2008) to analyse the communications dimensions of what I now call *social justice media.* Primary questions interrogate the historical antecedents, the composition of social actors, their relations with allied movements, their communications repertoires, and the impact on dominant institutions and especially the dominant commercial media.

This paper examines the Occupy movement. I draw primarily from participant observation at several street events, protests, public forums, and interviews in the San Francisco bay area where I live, and have been conducting research about social justice media for the last fifteen years, as well as much of the publicly available research and analyses from within Occupy itself, and from outside commentary and research from around the world.

Historical Antecedents

Describing the historical role of oppositional movements within the dominant culture, English activist and theorist, Raymond Williams, posited that each epoch consists of different variations and stages, and at every point there are dynamic, contradictory relationships in the interplay of *dominant*, *residual*, and *emergent* forms (1977). In

contrast to many reports, and paradoxically, as Gerbaudo has noted (2012:103), given its beginnings in the same country, and indeed high-tech city of San Francisco, where most of the global corporate social media giants are headquartered, Occupy was far from a spontaneous revolution sparked by or directed by twitter and other social media. Instead, the complex repertoire of communications practices, used by a panoply of social actors, derived from three earlier historical social movement cycles, oft-cited by Occupy participants, and which I briefly rehearse.

The first was the student and new left movements of the 1960s. The U.S. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and other groups, advocated "participatory democracy" where decisions were made by those affected by them (Polletta, 2013:41). Much of the new left's strategic repertoire was within the field of culture and communications. Before leading a street demonstration to Occupy Philadelphia on October 28, 2011, Angela Davis reminded us of this historical thread, when she spoke about the "long march through the institutions". Drawn from Antonio Gramsci, and modified by the German student leader Rudi Dutschke, she was referring to the strategy for political movements to peacefully take control of "the switch-points of social power" in the field of cultural values.

During the 1970s, one set of activists took up this call, myself among them, and founded alternative media organizations (variously called community media, radical media, or grassroots media). Their goals were to challenge corporate media hegemony of the institutions and practices of communications, and prefigure the kinds of social values they sought by facilitating a plurality of expression, especially from groups systemically excluded from constituted power. During the 1980s activists formed national, regional and transnational media networks, including community and social movement-based computer networks, long before the birth of the World Wide Web (Murphy, 2002). Nevertheless, this vision of non-hierarchical practice was constrained by the cost and accessibility of the means of media production and circulation, and as UK alternative media theorist, Chris Atton notes, a small corps of paid and volunteer producers ran most alternative media (2002).

The second historical moment, from which Occupy drew, was the Zapatista uprising against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993 in Chiapas Mexico.

Protesting the policy of enclosing the *ejidos*, or the common lands guaranteed by the 1917 Mexican revolutionary constitution, the Zapatistas succeeded in holding off the Mexican Army and gaining world attention, with a short-lived show of arms, and a much more powerful war of "images, words, legitimation and moral authority" (Martinez-Torres, 2001: 348).

The Zapatistas also represented a paradox; high-tech information technologies, crucial to a globalizing capitalism, turned against it by a rural, and primarily indigenous, guerrilla movement. With almost no electronic or digital communications resources of their own, the Zapatistas drew instead on the network of alternative and social movement media dubbed the "electronic fabric of struggle" by Harry Cleaver (1995). The Zapatistas inspired civil society in Mexico, and a growing transnational anti-corporate globalization movement with their inclusive, and more Gramscian war of position, which focused on strengthening participatory democracy, creative engagement in the cultural realm, and intercultural dialogues through *encuentros*, or face-to-face public assemblies.

The third historical moment took place in December 1999 in Seattle USA when a coalition of coalitions opposed to neo-liberal globalization used their own means of information and communication to mobilize tens of thousands to disrupt the meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Inspired by the Zapatistas' model of *horizontal* direct action, participatory democracy and cultural work, and recognizing that there would be little positive U.S. corporate news media coverage of the protests, alternative media producers, social justice movement activists, artists and radical software designers launched the Independent Media Center (IMC) (Kidd 2003).

The IMC represented a qualitative shift in the scope and scale of social justice media power. The IMC do-it-ourselves ethos not only by-passed the gate-keepers of the corporate news media; but also the *vertical* approach of the established non-governmental organizations (NGOs), whose spokespeople framed specific policy in terms friendly to the commercial news media, as well as the *institutional* approach of the established alternative media with their commitment to brick and mortar operations, permanent staff and relations with established community organizations. The IMC's open-source platform was much more nimble: it allowed anyone with Internet access to download and upload any genre of content, pre-dating blogging, you-tubing and web 2.0 by several

years. Very quickly, the global IMC grew to 150 autonomous media collectives around the world who functioned as the go-to medium for the emerging global justice movement. Nevertheless, the long-term viability of the IMC was limited by a lack of economic resources, and continuing tensions over the cultural capital of gender, race, class and rich country/poor country, all of which, positive and negative, were harbingers of Occupy.

After Seattle, there was an outburst of academic literature about social movement communications; however much of it neglected the long, slow and south-to-north build-up of the global justice movement, and instead attributed the success to the decentralized, flexible and distributed networks of the Internet. For example, in one oft-cited article by Naomi Klein, she wrote that the activist model "mirrors the organic, decentralized, interlinked pathways of the Internet." Less reported was her important caveat: "all this talk of radical decentralization conceals a very real hierarchy based on who owns, understands and controls the computer networks linking the activists to one another…a geek adhocracy" (2003).

Composition of Occupy

The Occupy Wall Street movement emerged on September 17, 2011, in downtown New York City as a protest against Wall Street, the global center of finance capital. Expanding very quickly, it grew to a trans-local movement known simply as Occupy, in which tens of thousands of people took over public squares and streets, and participated in off and on-line actions, in 951 cities in 82 countries, which then branched out into a number of still-existing political and cultural campaigns. Inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Greece, Spain and Mexico, Occupy built on the work of residual social justice movements and alternative communications groups and networks, converging many singular struggles of unemployed people, students, artists, trade unionists, anti-poverty groups, and media activists, which then in combination scaled up further than any other (Gamson and Sifry, 2013:162).

Not only was the collective DNA of Occupy much different than oft-reported; so was the individual make-up. The Occupy Research Network (ORN), a collaboration formed by the Oakland-based DataCenter.org, Indymedia activists, and other scholar activists, provides a more nuanced report (Costanza-Chock, 2012:6). For example, half of those they surveyed reported involvement in an earlier social movement. Large numbers of

white, male college-educated and net-savvy young people were indeed involved (Costanza-Chock, 2012). Nevertheless, at least half identified as working or lower middle class, with incomes at the median level of Americans, and with only a third employed full time. Significant contingents of trade unionists, U.S. military, working class people, and urban poor participated; and there were slightly more women than men.

Communication repertoires

Occupy's communicative innovation was not any particular technology or practice but its remediation and reconfiguration of earlier practices of residual social change movements. The rules of consensus for decision-making came from the feminist and anarchist traditions; the hand signals from the Disability Justice Movement (Costanza-Chock, 2012:7); the human mic from anti-nuclear rallies and the global justice movement (Desiriis 2013); the posters, street theatre, and street puppets from Reclaim the Streets (Rosenberg, 2012), the attention to daily care from the feminist movements (Haiven 2011); and the story-telling and testimonials from African American, Latin American and women's movements. Each of these face-to-face practices was then remediated and circulated across the Occupy network via web-based conversations, youtube videos or social media.

Experienced media activists helped out at many sites. For example, the Global Revolution stream provided real-time coverage from sites around the world; initiated by activists with Los Indignados in Madrid, it was supported by Indymedia and other long-time media activists. Other experienced hands helped set up working media, tech and press groups, which organized print publications, produced and circulated video narratives, designed and coded websites and wikis, built Occupy media platforms, liaised with alternative and commercial media outlets and supported social media presence (Costanza-Chock, 2012:4).

The Occupy Research Network's study of participants' communications practices and complicates the simplistic image of white youth leashed to social media (Costanza-Chock, 4-5). The digital divides that shape and are in turn shaped by existing U.S. class, race and gendered inequalities were prominent in Occupy. Although 64% reported using Facebook to gather information and 74% to post information; nearly half reported discussing Occupy face to face, a quarter used newspapers, and 42% email. The novelty for many

was the opportunity for face-to-face public dialogue; many were critical of the constraints of corporate commercial social media, and instead set up their own local websites (Caren and Gaby, 2011).

Occupy participants also used every form of artistic medium from posters, to music, ballet and flash-mob dance, street theatre, stand-up comedy and film. Sometimes art was employed tactically; singing en masse to stop foreclosure auctions, dancing flash-mob style to take over bank lobbies, or using masks to maintain anonymity in face of security cameras and police surveillance. Drawing from the carnival traditions of street protest, they combined the element of surprise with the critique of the status quo through role reversal, subversive humour, and full-bodied mass participation. On other occasions, the art practices were part of strategic interventions with existing organizations or neighbourhood groups that highlighted structural problems of unemployment and precarity; or celebrated and memorialized existing neighbourhoods (Atlas, 2012, Treibitz, 2012).

Story-telling was one of the primary modes of expression, used in interpersonal conversations, protest rallies and social media dialogues. Unlike formal deliberative genres, story-telling allows speakers to provide a more open, lived account of their own experience, to articulate situations, issues and values usually marginalized by the dominant culture (Polletta, 2006); which, in turn, encourages listeners to reconsider established ideas, stereotypes and social remedies, and to share their own narrative

Communications commons

Far from an existence only in social media, Occupy represented a renewed attention to local, off-line public spaces and territories (Halvorsen, 2012:5), providing unconventional intersections in which people come together to create new kinds of connections and solidarities (Atlas, 2012:152). Many described this collective reclamation of public space and time away from waged work as a *commons,* a theoretical framework I teased out initially from the autonomist network of *Midnight Notes* to characterize *autonomous media* (Kidd, 1998). Since then, several opposing notions of the *commons* have been developed. In brief, Occupy's politics of the commons was not a call to reinvigorate an abstract idea of the *knowledge commons,* nor the public institutions of the welfare state, but to create an alternative domain of collective production and social

reproduction, in opposition to the *enclosure* or privatization and commercialization of downtown cores, in which any non-conforming people (and especially the poor) had been turfed out, and the possibilities of "alternative sociability" and political encounter reduced (Gerbaudo, 2012: 105).

The encampments provided a glue of physical proximity, close working relationships and common obstacles and hardships, fostering "strong reciprocal trust and mutual support" (Marcuse, 2012). Rather than focusing outward, in reaction against state or corporate policies, or framing claims for ever-narrower constituencies that had become the trend for U.S. NGOs, the focus was on group-generated needs. They prefiguratively set up working groups to attend to people's daily needs, such as food, shelter, health and safety, and activities for kids; and to represent a diversity of collective imaginaries through arts and media projects.

Occupy provided multiple places of encounter, and a plastic sense of time, that facilitated rich dialogical and cultural exchanges and collective production of knowledge. As Sylvia Federici has argued, Occupy placed the "creation of more cooperative and egalitarian forms of human, social and economic relationships at the center of political work" (Haiven 2011). "Occupy took "people out of their own silos, forcing more cooperation. A whole lot of cross-fertilization happened" (Rosenberg 2012).

Echoing the consciousness-raising of the women's movements of the 1970s, and the Freirian conscientization, participants reflected on their life conditions and listened to one another, allowing for the articulation of private problems as collective and public issues (Sziarto & Leitner, 2010: 383). The mutual emotions that were unleashed created a "space for new identifications to emerge" (Sziarto & Leitner, 2010: 384), and allowed participants to recognize some of the deep social, economic and cultural divisions among them, and understand their relationship with other participants. Nevertheless, as the encampments shut down, most due to the coordinated national intervention of local police units, many of these same old social, political and cultural divisions re-merged.

Occupy and the news ecology

The Occupy movement changed the news ecology. Rather than focusing on media-friendly protests and sound bites, participants documented protests, reported on individual's stories and provided the analyses themselves. They by-passed the residual

commercial media gate-keepers by circulating their news on a number of different media platforms. Teams produced regular reports for news sites such as New York's "Occupy Wall Street Journal," and the live "Global Revolution" video stream; and thousands of individuals created youtube video reports. Over 170,000 people in the U.S. alone shared live reports, news about police arrests, and personal stories over 400 pages of Facebook. Hundreds wrote blog posts, such as "We are the 99 Percent" on Tumblr, or posted news stories to an Occupy Reddit site. The total views of all these postings were in the millions. Independent and alternative media organizations, with platforms in print, radio and television, then re-assembled the reports and stories for audiences off the web.

Nevertheless, Occupy depended on the mainstream news media to get the attention of the wider public and policy makers, especially in the first week of Occupy Wall Street. In fact, it took a photograph of a police commander pepper spraying a trio of young blonde women during a street demonstration before the dominant news media provided much coverage. The resultant mainstream news coverage, and the viral circulation of video of the women screaming in pain led to a rapid expansion of Occupy encampments around the world. The Occupy's movements' circulation of that image set the pace; after that, the commercial news media often struggled to keep up with the movement's news flow.

Occupy not only garnered much higher levels of U.S. dominant news coverage, much more of it positive, than earlier movements for political, economic and social justice (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). The dominant news frame changed, re-introducing long-silenced debates about class and systemic inequality (Stelter, 2011), and renewed visibility to social movements, and their capacity to "make history," as *Time Magazine* put it (Stenger, 2011). The coverage reversed a long downturn in which few news reports featured the role of community organizations in remedying local problems and injustices. (Kidd and Barker-Plummer, 2009). To be sure, the dominant genre of local commercial news continued; many of the stories featured incidents of violence. However, the strength of the *#Occupy* news flow meant that alternative narratives were "established in the public imagination," according to Oakland media activist Tracy Rosenberg: "Injustice, inequality, homelessness is not invisible and can't be swept away. The police can attack with flash grenades but we all have to see that. That makes a difference" (2012).

Lessons from Occupy

What can we learn about social justice media through applying this research rubric to the study of Occupy? Some brief remarks. The initial call to occupy Wall Street by the Canadian magazine, *adbusters,* was to challenge the power of Wall Street and its control of governmental processes in Washington and around the world. In this respect, Occupy failed. Nevertheless, if we ask a different set of questions, starting with an examination of their actual goals and practices, their relations with constitutive movements, and with the larger political economy of global corporations and national governments, Occupy was notable because of its contribution of democratic communications.

Examining the residual movements and the literature about them, I re-read Robert White's template about social movements and the democratization of communications from 1995, drawn primarily from his work in Latin America, and applied it to Occupy. Occupy "renovate[d] and democratized virtually all aspects of the communication process: the definition of communication, of what social actors may participate, the employment of new media technology, the democratization of existing technology, the redefinition of `media professionalism,' and the development of new codes of ethics and values" (White, 1995:93).

Occupy represented a new high point of social justice media in a much longer series of historical cycles. They were able, if only for a short time, to control their own communications production and circulation, and to bypass earlier dependencies on dominant commercial and state-controlled media practices. Key to their success was the multiple collective assemblies, the extended time period, the reclaiming of public space, on and off-line, and the simultaneous and linked developments, in many different places around the world. Occupy was able to converge many different social justice movements, and bring together activists and first-time participants, by modeling a complex repertoire of dialogical, deliberative and restorative communication.

Taking a transmedia approach, the evidence of Occupy's practice allows us to move beyond earlier debates about which is more effective, face-to-face, analog and digital media? Nevertheless, although some key Occupy participants critiqued the dependence on newly emerging forms of commercial social media, and attempted to create autonomous technologies and platforms, very serious questions remain about the

independence of social justice movements, given the current global dominance of the corporate social media over the communications practices of billions of citizens around the world.

Previous theorization about the earlier cycles of social movement communications, including the global justice movement (and in mobilizations of Latin America), revolved around notions of *networks* and *horizontality.* Analysing Occupy suggests our theorization needs to move beyond these simple, if attractive, metaphors. Many Occupiers characterized the movement as *horizontal* and *leaderless*; nevertheless as discussed above, and as Gerbaudo has noted, the movement was constitutively ridden with residual and emerging imbalances and assymetries (Bergaudo, 2012:19), troubling the "easy distinction between vertical and horizontal organizational structures" (Berger, Funke and Wolfson 2011: 189). While the numbers of leaders expanded beyond the older hierarchies dominated by white men, there were continual clashes over class position, race and gender. Not coincidentally, one of the most referenced articles in Occupy collections is Jo Freeman's "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" first published in 1970 during the emergence of the U.S. women's liberation movement.

The complex of social actors and communications repertoires, operating in and between material and cyber space, belies the easy overlay of a *cultural logic of networking* framework, invoked most assuredly by Juris, building on the work of Manuel Castells, to describe the alter-globalization movement (Juris 2004). The hybridization of complex networks, off and on-line, is not nearly so universal, so fluid, or so friction-less, as described; it ignores "the messy and dynamic ways in which activists engage with space" and the very complex and uneven relations between local nodes and international traffic (Halvorsen, 2012:6). Future research begs to address more fully these questions of power differences, not only with corporate and state power, but among and between movements themselves, and importantly between the different nodes of local, national and transnational networks. Finally, Occupy's communications repertoire has been remediated in both old and new community-based political and cultural initiatives (Khatib et al, 2012), and taken up by new social movement campaigns of immigrants, students, and low-wage workers throughout the U.S. In the new emerging cycle, how are the residual communications of Occupy being adapted?

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