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Mic Check! Media Cultures and the Occupy Movement

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ABSTRACT *Scholars and activists have hotly debated the relationship between social media and social movement activity during the current global cycle of protest. This article investigates media practices in the Occupy movement and develops the concept of social movement media cultures: the set of tools, skills, social practices and norms that movement participants deploy to create, circulate, curate and amplify movement media across all available platforms. The article posits three key areas of inquiry into social movement media cultures, and explores them through the lens of the Occupy movement: (1) What media platforms, tools and skills are used most widely by movement participants? (Practices); (2) What role do experienced practitioners play in movement media practices? (Expertise); and (3) In what ways does the movement media culture lean toward open or participatory, and in what ways toward closed or top-down? (Open/Closed). Insight into the media culture of the Occupy movement is based on mixed qualitative and quantitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, visual research and participation in Occupy Hackathons, as well as the Occupy Research General Demographic and Political Participation Survey, a database of approximately 1200 local Occupy sites, and a dataset of more than 13 million Occupy-related tweets. The findings will be of interest to both scholars and movement participants.*

KEY WORDS: Occupy, media cultures, media practices, ICTs

On the basis of research into media practices in the Occupy movement, this article proposes a shift away from platform-centric analysis of the relationship between social movements and the media toward the concept of *social movement media cultures*: the set of tools, skills, social practices and norms that movement participants deploy to create, circulate, curate and amplify movement media across all available platforms. I suggest three initial areas of inquiry about social movement media cultures:

- (1) Practices: What media platforms, tools and skills do movement participants use most widely?
- (2) Experts: What role do experienced practitioners play in movement media practices?
- (3) Openness: In what ways do movement media cultures lean toward open (participatory), and in what ways toward closed (top-down)?

Insights into media culture in the Occupy movement are based on mixed qualitative and quantitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, visual

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Figure 1. Occupy Media icon. *Source:* Occupy Design.

research in multiple Occupy sites and participation in Occupy Hackathons, as well as the Occupy Research General Demographic and Political Participation Survey (ORGS) and a dataset of more than 13 million tweets with Occupy-related hashtags (Figure 1).

Background

On 17 September 2011, a small group of activists took New York City's (NYC) Zuccotti Park and sparked a movement that, in three short months, would spread across the country and around the world. Occupy Wall Street (OWS) was inspired by the global protest wave that began in Tunisia with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, spread across the Middle East and North Africa in what is now broadly referred to as the Arab Spring, and continued through the Israeli 'Social Justice Summer', Spanish 'Indignados' mobilizations and Greek anti-austerity uprisings. The initial call to OWS was circulated by *Adbusters* magazine, a publication that gained visibility during the height of the Global Justice Movement as an important home for high production value ad-hacking, brand contamination and *détournement*. The call to action gained momentum when it was endorsed by the loose global network of hacktivists known as Anonymous, in a widely circulated web video (<http://youtu.be/2svRa-VsaOU>; Schultz, 2008; Coleman, 2010). OWS began to receive significant mass media coverage only after police brutality against protest participants. Video clips of NYC Police Department (NYPD) Deputy Inspector Anthony Bologna pepper-spraying a kettled group of unarmed young women during a march on 24 September, circulated first via social media and later broadcast on multiple TV networks, brought an initial wave of mass media attention to the movement (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZ05rWx1pig>). Shortly afterward, social, print and broadcast media attention all spiked as NYPD corralled and arrested hundreds of people participating in the 1 October march across the Brooklyn Bridge.

Sophisticated new data-gathering and visualization approaches, such as work by Pablo Rey Mazón (2011) at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for Civic Media,



Figure 2. Percentage of newspaper front pages and number of Occupy tweets per day. Source: Pablo Rey Mazón (2011).

allow us to observe the development of newspaper coverage about the movement in comparison to its presence on social media sites such as Twitter (see Figure 2).

For the next three months, OWS maintained an ongoing presence in Zuccotti Park, organized regular protest marches and actions throughout lower Manhattan and generated huge amounts of media attention across social network sites (SNS), print and broadcast platforms. The movement spread widely, with camps and ongoing mobilizations in nearly every major US city including Oakland, Los Angeles, Boston, Seattle, Chicago and many more (both in the USA and internationally). Within six months, over 6500 Occupiers had been arrested while protesting (see @occupyarrests at <https://twitter.com/occupyarrests>). In over 1000 cities and towns, Occupy groups sprang up and conducted General Assemblies (GAs), formed Working Groups (WGs), initiated marches and engaged in a wide range of protest activities and prefigurative politics.

Throughout the spread of the Occupy movement, Occupiers produced and circulated media texts and self-documentation across every platform they had access to (see Figure 1). SNS were crucial for the spread of media created by everyday Occupiers, while media, press and tech WGs worked to build SNS presence (especially on Twitter and Facebook), create more highly produced narratives, edit videos, operate 24-hour livestreams such as Globalrevolution.tv, organize print publications such as the *Occupied Wall Street Journal*, design and code websites such as OccupyTogether.org and wikis such as NYCGA.cc, and build autonomous movement media platforms and technology infrastructure (see Occupy.net). Members of these WGs also worked with members of the press, from independent reporters and local media outlets to journalists from national and transnational print, television and radio networks.

What can we understand about social movement media cultures by looking more closely at these and other aspects of the media culture of the Occupy movement? As an exploratory move let us turn to movement media *practices*, *expertise* and *openness*.

Practices

Mass media accounts of Occupy often emphasize the digitally connected nature of the protesters. Indeed, supposedly high levels of digital access ('they all have Apple computers and iPhones') are invoked to dismiss the movement on thinly coded class grounds. In fact, all Occupations face significant digital inequality, which itself both shapes and is shaped by existing structural inequalities of class, race and gender (Hargittai, 2008). These divides are, unsurprisingly, replicated within the media practices of the Occupy movement. Many Occupiers are both highly conscious of this fact and take active steps to attempt to mitigate it:

For a long time, we were saying that there weren't enough people of color, or enough LGBTQ people,' says Mazen. 'But overall we're also working with people who barely text, let alone vote on a Wiki. If we really want to represent the 99 percent, we have to think about how we can disseminate through low-tech means. (Faraone, 2011)

Media practices within Occupy are marked by extensive offline, analog, poster and print-based, and 'low-tech' forms of media production, in parallel with cutting-edge technology development and use (autonomous wireless networks, hackathons, creation of new tools and platforms). In many cases, Occupy activists make and circulate media elements across platforms (including analog media forms and channels) in processes elsewhere described as *transmedia mobilization* (Costanza-Chock, 2011).

In this context, what media platforms are most widely used by the Occupy movement? Participant observation, interviews and survey data all reveal a complex picture on the ground. The ORGS, an online survey with about 5000 respondents, organized by the Occupy Research Network (which I co-founded) along with Oakland-based DataCenter.org, provides one data point (see Figure 3; for more details about the ORGS methodology, please see Occupy Research & Data Center, 2012).

Among those who answered questions about how they used different types of media to gather news and information about the Occupy movement, respondents were heavy users of some digital media platforms but not others. The majority (64%) reported using Facebook for Occupy-related information within the 24 h before taking the survey, while just a quarter said that they used Twitter (23%) or blogs (24%) for the same purpose. Face-to-face communication played a key role for many: nearly half (43%) reported discussing Occupy within the previous 24 h, about the same as those who said they used Occupy movement websites (44%) or email (42%). A third (29%) used YouTube, a quarter (24%) used newspapers and a fifth used a livestreaming video site (19%), TV (17%) or radio (17%) for Occupy information during the past day.

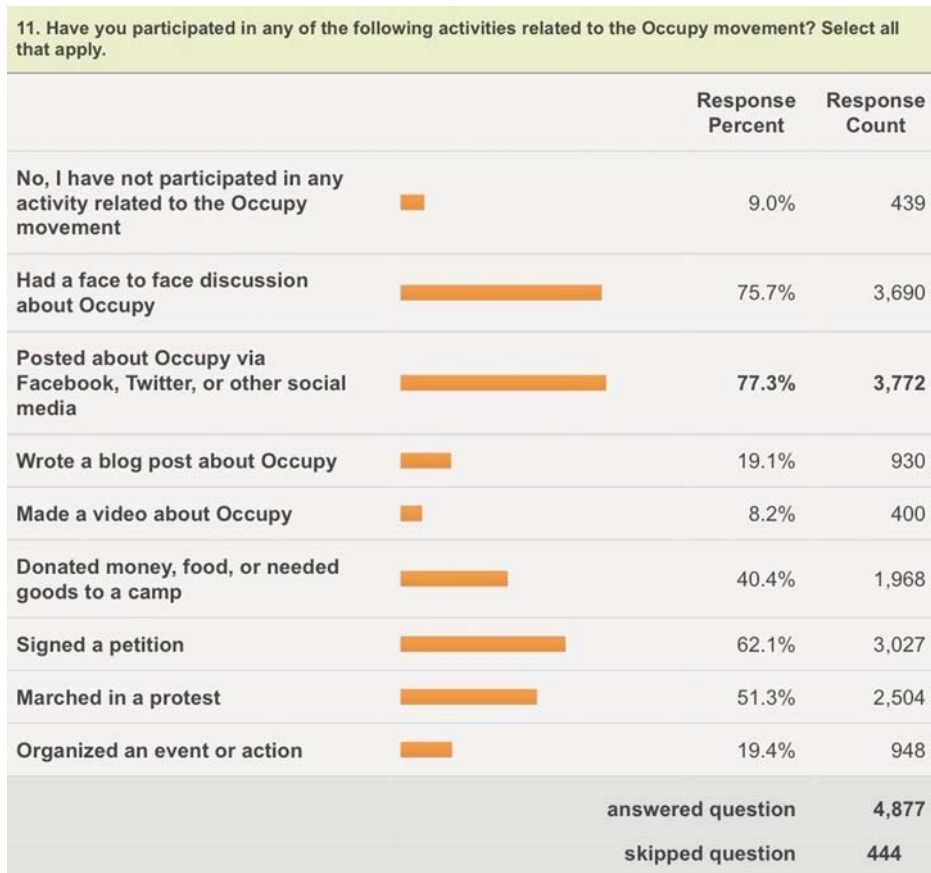


Figure 3. Occupy activity participation. Source: ORGS (2012).

As for media making, the most common activities reported by respondents were posting on Facebook (74%) and participating in face-to-face conversations about the movement (73%). A smaller group of Occupiers were involved in more intensive forms of media making: about a fifth of survey respondents (18%) said that they wrote blog posts, while less than one in 10 (8%) made a video about Occupy. These low proportions for high-engagement media production practices should not be a surprise; they mirror similar percentages across the general US population (for example, see recent reports at <http://www.pewinternet.org>). If we compare media-making activities with other forms of participation, most respondents of ORGS reported attending GAs (69%) and participating in protests organized at camps (69%), while more than a third volunteered to provide food or services (41%), took part in workshops or events (40%) or participated in working groups (38%); 17% lived or slept in camps and about 4% got arrested.

Overall, while smaller numbers of Occupiers perform higher-engagement media practices, the majority take part in face-to-face movement activities while appropriating social media sites to circulate movement-related media (mostly in the form of short posts and status updates, FB likes and shares).

Expertise

Social movement scholars have long noted that movement actors often travel from one social movement organization to another, and from one movement to another, over the course of their lives (Roth, 2000). This is certainly true for the Occupy movement as a whole, with more than half of the respondents of the ORGS survey reporting that Occupy is not their first social movement (Occupy Research & Data Center, 2012). It is also true within specific WGs. Many WGs were formed by people with previous experience in horizontalist movement spaces. For example, many of the food tents and WGs were set up by participants in local chapters of Food Not Bombs, libraries were often initiated by librarians from the Radical Reference network, medical teams often included Street Medics who gained experience in mass mobilizations against global financial institutions or the Iraq war (Pelly, 2012). Many of those who initially facilitated GAs had previous experience with direct democracy and consensus processes in the context of the Global Justice Movement (Juris, 2012).

In this context, it is no surprise that networks of experienced media activists also play key roles in all major Occupations, usually through participation in media and tech tents and WGs (see Figure 4). Occupations often also have press WGs, while a few have public relations WGs or InterOccupation communication groups. Media teams almost always include experienced media activists, and individual media activists who move between movement networks bring specific practices with them. Many, if not most, of the practices seen as innovations of the Occupy movement (not only by both outside observers and mass



Figure 4. Media tents at Occupy Boston, Detroit and London. *Source:* Indymedia.org.

media journalists, but also by many Occupiers) actually have much longer histories. Specific examples of communication practices popularized by the Occupy movement, but developed earlier, include formal consensus process as used in GAs (with a long history traced back by some to Quakers and by others to the anarchist movement); the set of hand signals used during consensus process (developed by the Disability Justice movement) and the technique known as the People's Mic, as well as practices more commonly thought of as 'media', for example livestreaming and the *Occupied Wall Street Journal*.

The People's Mic

In large crowds with no amplification, the People's Mic consists of one individual speaking in single sentences or sentence fragments, their words repeated after each pause by all those assembled (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Bu9K26Qt1I>). This technique was adopted widely within the Occupy movement, in some locations initially due to bans on sound amplification, but soon as a general part of the movement culture and a signifier of the participatory nature of the Assemblies. The Occupy movement popularized the technique and made it a part of broader consciousness, both through the direct experience of thousands at GAs and through widespread circulation of recordings of the People's Mic in practice. Video and audio of the People's Mic spread via broadcast television and commercial radio newscasts, on YouTube, across social media platforms and in real-time live streams from mobile phones and laptops. However, the technique itself was not an invention of the Occupy movement. The exact origin is not clear, but the People's Mic was used during anti-nuclear rallies in the 1980s (Kahn, 2011), as well as in the Global Justice Movement during the 1990s. For example, the technique appears in *This Is What Democracy Looks Like* (1999), a feature-length documentary about the protests that shut down the WTO Ministerial in Seattle in 1999, produced by Big Noise Films in collaboration with dozens of Indymedia video activists (this film also provided a template for the failed Hollywood dramatization *Battle in Seattle*, with Woody Harrelson). In the film's dramatic closing scene, several hundred people are assembled in solidarity with arrestees inside the King County jail. The People's Mic is used to announce that the protests have played a key role in ending the trade negotiations; veteran Chicago Seven activist Tom Hayden then uses the technique to share a prefigurative prose poem (see minute 55, at <http://archive.org/details/ThisIsWhatDemocracyLooksLike>):

(Crowd repeats each line)

I never thought
the time would come
that a new generation of activists would part the waters.
The waters in which your idealism is supposed to be drowned
and come to the surface
smiling, fighting, laughing, dancing, marching,
committing civil disobedience
renewing American democracy
concretely
expressing solidarity
Not only here in the United States

but in the far corners of the earth
beyond the eye of the media.

Tom Hayden, *This Is What Democracy Looks Like* (Big Noise Films, 2000)

The Global Revolution Livestream

Live video streaming in general, and the Global Revolution livestream in particular (<http://globalrevolution.tv>), became a key symbol of the sophistication of media practices in the Occupy movement. At the peak of the mobilizations, up to 80,000 unique viewers per day tuned in to watch DIY real-time streams from Occupations around the country and around the world. GlobalRevolution.tv was initiated by experienced video activists who worked with the Glassbead Collective (<http://glassbeadcollective.org>) and Twin Cities Indymedia to cover the Republican National Convention (RNC) in 2008, and subsequently to cover radical culture and social movement activity in NYC. At the RNC 2008, citizen media organization The Uptake (<http://theuptake.org>) gained some notoriety for live streaming the protests using smartphones; in this context, activists who later founded GlobalRevolution learned about the viability of this tactic. Other recent notable social movement live streams include those from the Wisconsin State Capitol during the 2011 protest wave against Governor Scott Walker's anti-union measures, as well as during the DREAM activist takeover of Senator McCain's office in 2010. Indeed, the practice of live video coverage of movement activity in the US dates back at least to the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Deep Dish TV organized satellite uplinks for live feeds from anti-nuclear and anti-war demonstrations. The broader availability of smartphones with the ability to stream live via the net thus vastly expands, although does not provide the first instance of, the capacity of movement media makers to produce live video coverage of mobilizations.

These stories could be repeated many times over, with rich specificity and local context for a general shared story: in many cases, though not all, media and tech WGs were organized by activists with previous social movement experience (more often than not, in the Indymedia network). In other words, innovative media practices, for the most part, did not spring fully formed from the fertile minds of massed 'digital youth'. Rather, without downplaying the innovations of Occupiers, or the energy and creativity of dedicated activists engaging in the process of media teams and WGs, we can also recognize the importance of a biographical or life-course approach to understanding social movement media cultures.

Open/Closed

Social movement media cultures might be characterized along an axis with top-down (vertical) message control on one end, and participatory (horizontal) media making on the other. A movement's location along the axis may be shaped, but is not determined, by factors including the technical affordances of the dominant media platforms, levels of information and communications technology (ICT) access and media literacies in the general population and the population of movement participants, legal and normative constraints on speech and so on. Occupy, as a movement, is characterized by extreme openness. Practices that promote open and transparent communication include public live notes during GAs, live streaming of GAs and the practice of printing out GA and WG notes to make them physically accessible in libraries. In keeping with the slogan that Occupy

was not a leaderless, but instead a ‘leaderful’ movement, many Occupations organized open media trainings in which any movement participant could learn how to speak to the press. The most important force pushing Occupy toward openness is the participatory nature of the GAs (see Figure 5) and of nearly all WGs, including media and press WGs. Overall, Occupy media teams do operate in ways that are participatory and open.

At the same time, within Occupy there are strong forces ‘leaning toward closed’: security culture, the clash between ‘hard core’ and less frequent participants, and the very real tensions between openness and respect for hardwork and dedication. Ultimately, perhaps the strongest forces militating against true openness are those identified by feminist scholar Freeman as the tyranny of structurelessness (1972): truly equitable participation in formally open processes is still always structured by race, class and gender inequality. Processes that are ‘open’ are thus typically dominated by white straight males, by those with class, race and gender privilege, including access to free time, feeling empowered to speak in public and today, by increased access to digital literacies and ICTs.

As the Occupy movement unfolded and critiques of its racial composition (mostly white) began to surface, many local Occupations attempted to address their lack of diversity and to develop stronger analyses of structural racism. In NYC, a small group of Women of Color successfully blocked consensus on the Declaration of the Occupation of New York to rewrite language around race and gender. They formed the core of the People of Color (POC) WG, which grew rapidly to meetings of over 200 POC, inspired POC WG formation in many other Occupy locations and brought the analysis of race and gender



Figure 5. General Assembly, Liberty Square, October 2011. *Source:* Occupied Wall Street Journal.



Figure 6. Occupy the Hood logo. *Source:* Occupy the Hood Facebook page.

forward inside the Occupy movement as a whole (see more on race and Occupy by Colorlines at <http://colorlines.com/tag/Occupy%20Wall%20Street>). Occupy the Hood was also formed by seasoned activists (such as Malik Rahsaan) during the early stages of movement growth, to connect Occupy to communities of color, deepen connections to existing organizations and movement networks in those communities, and advance a more inclusive, just and equitable vision of the movement's possibilities (see Figure 6).

At the micro-procedural level, many GAs adopted a modified version of consensus process that included progressive stack, wherein women, POC and LGBTQ folks are able to move more quickly to the front of 'stack' (the list of people waiting to speak during GAs or WG meetings). However, at the time of writing, Occupy continues to be dominated by Anglo faces and voices in both face-to-face practice and mass media representation—and more importantly, to subsume intersectional analysis of racial and gendered inequality within a relatively simplistic articulation of class inequality.

Conclusions

This article began with a short overview of the Occupy movement, then turned to a discussion of key areas of inquiry into social movement media cultures. In terms of media tools, skills, practices and norms, Occupy turns out to be complex and internally differentiated, rather than a mass of digitally savvy youth with laptops and smartphones. Surveys, participant observation and interview data indicate that most Occupiers use face-to-face communication and engage in Facebook activity, and much smaller subgroups engage in media practices such as blogging, video production, livestreaming and print media. Media, tech and press WGs composed of small numbers of relatively highly skilled, more experienced movement actors play key roles in creating, curating and circulating media texts, as well as in shaping the media culture of the movement. Previous histories of movement media practice, as well as key individuals with past experience as movement communicators, also influence social movement media cultures and bring tactics, techniques, skills, knowledge and social networks with them across their life course. At the same time, as a 'leaderful' movement, Occupy has resisted designation of particular individuals as spokespeople, even as internal and external pressures militate toward closure

around access to standing in print and broadcast media. In a context of structural inequality that shapes participation along intersecting lines of race, class and gender, Occupy has made some attempts to more systematically include the voices of women, people of color and LGBTQ folks in both internal and external communication processes. However, there is much more to be done in this direction. Overall, the media culture of the Occupy movement leans strongly toward open, distributed and participatory processes. Hopefully the concept of social movement media cultures, as well as the areas of inquiry explored here, can be used by movement actors and scholars to better understand the relationship between social movements and the rapidly changing media ecology.

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