Mundane internet tools, the risk of exclusion, and reflexive movements—Occupy Wall St and political uses of digital networked technologies

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The very fact that some refer to the Occupy movement as "#Occupy" (with reference to the hashtags used on the microblogging platform Twitter) illustrates how closely the movement is identified with some of the digital and networked technologies some activists have relied upon. Examples include not only brand-name platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Tumblr, and Livestream, but also a variety of wiki-type sites as well as older tools such as email and text-messaging. Most of these tools are new. Few of them existed as recently as during the 1990s the global justice movement (one of several precursors to the Occupy movement).

What we might learn from Occupy Wall Street about the relationship between social movements, relatively new "social media" like Twitter, and the wider panoply of digital and networked technologies that are increasingly integral to collective action in places where they are widely available? My view is that activism in cases like the Occupy movement should be seen as "internet-assisted" (Nielsen 2009, 2011). (Other scholars prefer "digitally enabled" (Earl and Kimport 2011) or "digitally networked" (Bennett and Segerberg 2012).) This notion is meant to move us beyond increasingly misleading binaries inherited from the 1990s and early 2000s, such as the sharp distinctions then made between online and offline, the "virtual" and the "real", "cyberspace" and "meatspace". These dichotomies may still help draw distinctions between almost entirely digital forms of political action like distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks (as practiced by for example the hacker collective Anonymous), but distract us from recognizing

the fact that a rapidly growing number of digital and networked technologies are increasingly ubiquitous and increasingly integral to many forms of social action, including political activism. Seeing social movements that use digital technologies as "internet-assisted" also allows a way past the false binary between on the one hand offline organizing, strong ties, and enduring, effective action and on the other hand online organizing, weak ties, and ineffectual and ephemeral protests posited by authors like Malcolm Gladwell (2010). As the editors of this special section on Occupy suggests, social media and the like are associated with inconsequential, low-risk involvement and a false sense of participation—"slacktivism"—as often as they are associated with more accessible, participatory, and open forms of collective action. Both positions are in my view misleading. We need to reject the notion that the very use of the internet necessarily leads to one or the other form of activism and pay more attention to how different internet tools are used by different parts of different movements. Tools do not determine action, they afford it. What they afford differ from case to case and calls for closer scrutiny.

From this position I will make three observations about the Occupy movement and its use of, amongst other things, social media like Twitter as parts of wider organizing practices that also involve offline techniques like the now-famous "human microphone", a repertoire of meeting formats, decision processes, and hand gestures imported from the anarchist movement, as well as generic things like occupations, marches, and face-to-face meetings. First, digital and networked technologies are relatively mundane tools to most of the activists who use them (and thus from their perspective not "new media"). Second, because Occupy defines itself as a broad-based movement for social justice ("We are the 99%"), it is clear that there are many amongst those that the digitally savvy Occupy activists hope to engage, mobilize, and represent who do

not have regular internet access, social networking profiles, or high web use skills—facts that raise the risk of social exclusion. Third, key individuals in the Occupy movement are acutely aware of the organizing challenges that their partial reliance on digital and networked technologies represents, and have worked strategically and reflexively to monitor their own forms of communication and organizing in part to handle this problem. Each point in the essay is based on secondary sources from the web presence of various Occupy-related groups and activists, online discussions of the movement, and news media coverage of it. (I have visited Occupy protests and spoken to people involved, but I have not conducted systematic field research on the movement.) I will go through each point in turn.

1) The reliance on mundane internet tools. For many Occupy activists, tools like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (let alone email), are entirely mundane, no more exotic than a car and probably for many a good deal less exotic than a bullhorn or a placard. They are what I have elsewhere called "mundane internet tools" (Nielsen 2011), digital and networked technologies that are available at-hand all around us, naturalized parts of a built communications environment that those who have access take for granted. Especially for younger participants, accustomed to relying on social networking sites and smartphones in everyday life, it would require a conscious choice to organize in ways that were *not* in part reliant on these tools. A wide array of social media has been integral to how at least some of those involved in Occupy got engaged and how those involved organize and communicate, but because tools afford rather than determine action, this in itself says nothing about the character of the activities they have been involved in. It is not clear that a tendency towards low risk or short-lived activism is inherent in online technologies (nor that a tendency towards high risk or long-lasting activism inherent in offline organizing—as is clear from the uneven track record of previous social movements). Email can be used to

coordinate a non-violent protest in the face of police brutality or for casual sharing of political opinions amongst a few friends, just as printing technology can produce plans for a violent revolution or humorous bumper stickers. It is up to those involved to decide which path to pursue and it is condescending to assume that people engaging in various forms of internet-assisted activism cannot tell the difference between relatively superficial forms (sharing a story about the movement on Facebook) and more substantial forms (joining a march organized in part online). A great number of Occupy supporters are arguably "slacktivists" in the sense that they have only weak ties to the movement, but many of them probably prefer it like that. Superficial engagement need not reflect false consciousness.

2) The risk of social exclusion. As of mid-2011, data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project suggested only 79 percent of the 99 percent that Occupy aims to engage, mobilize, and represent in the United States were internet users, and that 47 percent regularly used the most popular social networking sites like Facebook. Especially amongst older and poorer parts of the population, the very same tools that are entirely mundane to many younger Occupy activists from middle class backgrounds remain inaccessible and/or unfamiliar. Different new forms of media use disseminate at different rates within different demographic and socio-economic groups, and even the most mundane things are unequally distributed. This presents organizers with a delicate challenge especially when the aim is to build inclusive, shared forms of activism that reach beyond brand-name social media still not used by everyone and does not presume that all potential participants can be mobilized for offline events (or are familiar with or in favor of for example traditional forms of anarchist and/or radical left activism). To put it plainly—how can a movement "meet them where they are" when organizers have limited resources and "they," those people that one hopes to mobilize, are in sometimes wildly different

places, using different communication platforms, and accustomed to widely different forms of civic engagement (if any at all)? If organizers rely too heavily on tools and techniques that some but not others are comfortable with over time, this will influence who are recruited into the movement—something that is true irrespective of whether those tools and techniques are online (social networking sites, wikis, etc) or offline (general assemblies, occupations, etc). The form a movement takes helps shape its content.

      3) <u>A reflexive movement.</u> Both the reliance in part on mundane internet tools and the risk of social exclusion involved in relying on them when they are far from universally available and used are traits characteristic of many social movements active across the world (Indignados in Spain as much as Occupiers in the US, right-wing mobilizations as much as left-wing ones). The particular self-reflexive relationship that parts of the Occupy movement have had in relation to their own use of technology is probably less of a general phenomenon (though not unique). First of all, some people involved have seemed critical of the tendency of some to identify the movement with brand-name social media and remain wary of relying too much on corporate social networking sites monetized by private companies and seen as vulnerable to police surveillance. (A similar discussion took place within the alternative globalization movement in the 1990s especially around the Indymedia collectives and other attempts to build separate infrastructures for radical political action.) Second, a subset of Occupy activists have operated to build up actual research capacity in the form of "Occupy research" networks and groups collaborating online and meeting offline around the US to reflect on, and over time shape, the ways in which people involved in the movement organizing and communicate. Appropriating Marshall Ganz' notion of resourcefulness (2000)—developed for understanding how resource-poor social movements can sometimes succeed even when faced with resource-rich rivals and

opponents—it seems that parts of the Occupy movement have built reflexive resourcefulness and tried to continuously monitor their own communication practices. (It is an empirical question to what degree other contemporary movements are similarly reflexive about their use of digital technologies.)

If one looks at the Occupy movement as an example of internet-assisted activism in a fast-changing communications environment, it looks both ordinary and extraordinary—ordinary in its reliance on increasingly widely used "mundane internet tools" and in the challenges that surround their still-uneven availability and familiarity, extraordinary not only in the attention the movement has generated, the degree to which some have identified it with a few of the many tools and techniques used to organize—let us remember that for those involved, Occupy is about inequality, not the internet—but probably also in the particularly reflexive and resourceful relationship some people involved have cultivated vis-à-vis their own communication and organizing practices. Irrespective of the fate of the Occupy movement specifically, the many different activists involved have led by example and have accumulated experiences, skills, and knowledge that they will take with them and perhaps share with other social movements elsewhere, fighting in the years to come for the same, or other, causes.

References

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