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## ***Occupy: Social Media in Social Movement Pedagogy***

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### **Abstract**

This article argues for positioning social media as a subject of classroom inquiry in the study of the *Occupy Wall Street* protests of 2011. The inclusion of social media helps students critically examine—and consequently challenge—the way traditional media writes the history of contemporary social change initiatives.

### **Introduction**

Pedagogues have been much more concerned with teaching traditional media coverage of social movements than with exploring protestors' social media strategies. Such strategies have remained mostly inconsequential to learning about media effects on social movements until recently. Contemporary movements, like Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and Arab Spring, make necessary the inclusion of social media because it has “exploded as an effective tool of communication, not only to connect socially, but also to ignite social action” (Pickerill and Krinsky, 280).

In the Fall 2012 semester, I taught an upper-level undergraduate communication course entitled *Communication and Social Movements*. As a class, we uncovered multiple mediated realities of OWS. Motivated by the use of media during the OWS protests, and in light of the pedagogical approaches to media and social movements, I offer my classroom discussion of media and Occupy. I first discuss the importance of media in teaching social movements. Then I differentiate traditional and social media and how my class researched the OWS coverage from both. Finally, I argue that right- and left-leaning media is just as influential as traditional and social media for the life of a social movement.

### **Media and Social Movements**

It is often difficult to remember that students do not have the same formative experiences, have not lived through the same political events, and have not witnessed or participated in the same changes that we have. To remind myself of that, I begin each major movement that we study by asking students to jot down their first impressions of the

movement and the questions they have about it. I encourage them to tell me how things look from their historical vantage point. I also ask how their impressions were formed (e.g., conversations with family, textbooks, etc). At the end of a unit, we discuss if and how their impressions of the movement have changed, what was most important to understand about it, and whether there are lessons for contemporary activists. In the class, the social movements covered were historical up until the unit about OWS. Meaning, there was no shared historical memory besides what we have been told. Because of our shared cultural memory of the 2011 Occupy protests, it was imperative to integrate Occupy into our semester's agenda.

OWS began on September 17, 2011 in the New York City Wall Street financial district, protests surrounded the issues of economic inequality and the perceived undue influence of corporations on government. Some students shared their initial impressions via word association: homeless people, camp ins, pepper spray, freaks in the street, hippies, unemployed college students. Their impressions were formed by "seeing it on the news," hearing about it from headlines, going to local Occupy meet-ups, and just generally being aware that OWS "happened."

### **Media: Traditional and Social**

In my class, the ideas of framing, representation, message effectiveness, and public responses are the sites for media inquiry. Such sites have influenced social movements for centuries. Pedagogically, instructors have considered the degrees of influence largely via discussion on how the medium is the message (McLuhan), or, how media (e.g., television news format) influences the form, content, and potential impact of the message.

The study of social movements and the role that media has in shaping, contextualizing, and altering them is based largely on a traditional media. Traditional media is centralized, one-to-many in form, commercial, professionally-produced, and proprietary. Whereas, social media tends to be decentralized, many-to-many, nonmarket, peer-produced, nonproprietary, open-source platforms, commons based, and free or inexpensive in access and in distribution (Benkler, 1-32). Social media is multilaterally accessible to different groups of people with various levels of commitment; members and organizations are allowed to link and mobilize a virtual or physical reality (van de Donk, et al., 9). In turn, a social movement can respond quickly to challenges and be less dependent on traditional media to get its message out to a broad audience (11).

Scholarship about social media and social movements is surrounded by how activists use tools of social media. Is it revolutionary or just a fad? Some champion Twitter revolutions: they tout how former U.S. National Security Council official Mark Pfeifle recommended nominating Twitter for the Nobel Peace Prize (Sno1). Others defend embodied protest, similar to Malcolm Gladwell's article, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted." In which, Gladwell begs the question: "Are people who log on to their Facebook page really the best hope for us all?" The debate of social media versus embodied protest is futile. For my class, there is no distinction between mediated and real. Mediated worlds are real and reality is always mediated (by media,

language, culture, ideologies, and perceptual practices). We can no longer reduce our discussion about media and Occupy to a well-worn debate about the validity of the use of social media in social movements.

In the U.S., OWS was the first large-scale activism saturated with smart phones. No longer do we need to go to a medium or find an Internet connection, for they are in our pocket, a part of us. No longer do we turn to *The New York Times* and *CBS News* to determine the boundaries of our world and the narratives of history. Such use of online media has become integral to contemporary protest. “Like most collective action in recent years, Facebook, Blogs, and Twitter were extensively used and many Occupy camps were extremely media savvy” (Pickerill and Krinsky 284). Sites like these allow power to be shifted to the people. They create two-way and real-time communication between individuals and the public (Bhuiyan).

### **Class Assignment**

As a class, we devised a way to see the differences between the information shared about Occupy via traditional and social media. We looked at coverage of the first three weeks of OWS from traditional and social media, respectively. The students had two questions to apply to their findings: How did traditional news “cover” Occupy? And, what type of coverage did social media provide?

For the first week of our unit, students researched traditional media, specifically, newspaper and television news coverage of OWS. Overwhelmingly, students found that traditional media news used two predominant strategies to marginalize OWS activists. The first was to ignore them, dooming them to invisibility. The second was to frame them negatively. First, in terms of invisibility, traditional U.S. media choose to completely ignore OWS in its origin, reducing it to a non-existent status during its earliest stages, yet it received international coverage from England, China, and other countries. For example, a headline within the first two weeks of OWS from *China Daily* reads: “One of the best kept secrets in the United States over the past two weeks seems to be the protest on and near Wall Street in New York” (Weihua). Whereas, only a day after that headline, *The New York Times* reported its first OWS story titled “Wall Street Occupiers, Protesting Till Whenever” (Kleinfield & Buckley, A1).

Second, in terms of negative framing, OWS activists were framed as hippies, flakes, and deviant disturbers of the established order. Consider the opening paragraph from the previously mentioned *Times* piece:

A man named Hero was here. So was Germ. There was a waitress from the dim sum restaurant in Evanston, Ill. And the liquor store worker. The Google consultant. The circus performer. The Brooklyn nanny. The hodgepodge lower Manhattan encampment known as Occupy Wall Street has no appointed leaders, no expiration date for its rabble-rousing stay and still-evolving goals and demands” (Kleinfield & Buckley).

The study of social movement communication generally revolves around the protestors’ ability to communicate the need for social change. A staggering amount of traditional OWS media coverage was on the ambiguity of the movement. Demands from OWS

protestors were on the one hand, ubiquitous and yet, on the other hand, very easy to sum up: “No one is confused about the message. Wall Street got bailed out; Main Street was abandoned. The top 1% rigs the rules and pockets the rewards. And 99% get sent the bill for the party they weren’t even invited to” (Borosage). I was impressed when students concluded that traditional media had a vested interest in preserving the world as it is, in perpetuating the status quo. As a result, OWS activists advocating social change had strained relations with mainstream media.

For the second week of the unit, students researched the social media archive from the first three weeks of the protests, particularly political blogs that featured Occupy news. We were inundated with information about OWS. In class, we performed a search using Google Blog Search for blogs mentioning “Occupy Wall Street: between 17 September and 17 October, 2011” that yielded over 10 million results. Along with the question about protestor portrayal, I asked students to uncover themes of right-and left-leaning political blogs, respectively.

### **Right-and Left-Leaning Influences**

The class concurred that right-and left-leaning political blogs used the blog platform in different ways. It is no exaggeration to say that in the two alternative worlds of right and left political bloggers, the OWS protest is a wholly different event. Right-leaning blogs saw OWS protestors as angry, and therefore dangerous, whereas left-leaning blogs tended to see this anger as legitimate and not dangerous. For left-leaning bloggers, the participation in OWS of the unemployed, students burdened by educational debt, and even the homeless, was seen as evidence of OWS’s justness, not as evidence that Occupy is made up of immature, irresponsible freeloaders.

The main point of difference between right- and left-leaning blogs is found in their interpretations of the authenticity and legitimacy of OWS. Right-leaning bloggers sought to delegitimize the protestors by framing them as nonproductive, degenerate, or dangerous members of society who should therefore not have a voice. Whereas, left-leaning bloggers attributed the following impacts to OWS: educating the public about and raising awareness of economic inequality in the U.S., and calling attention to the use of police brutality to repress political dissent. Where right-leaning blogs were primarily concerned with comparing OWS to the Tea Party, left-leaning blogs offered comparisons to other protest movements, such as the civil rights movement, and Arab Spring.

After my class’s two-week unit on OWS, I learned from and connected to my millennial students via our shared smart phone culture. Most of my students admitted to doing research for this unit on their smart phones or tablets. With information literally in their back pockets comes the expectation to civically participate.

### **Conclusion**

Following our unit on OWS, we discussed several of the readings I mentioned earlier and then “reread” the traditional mediated versions of OWS. The students concluded that perhaps social media was not essential to the OWS movement; however, sites such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as blogs, made protest possible sooner, and helped Occupy

develop in a way that would have been impossible without social media. From my perspective, we need to reevaluate how we study social movements in light of the Occupy Wall Street protests because social media has opened new possibilities for communication and social change.

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