# New Forms of Activism in the Networked Society

In recent years developments in technology have allowed us to communicate in exciting new ways. In particular, the Internet has been at the crux of this; providing a new platform for networks of all kinds to exist, function and expand. With this has come the opportunity for new forms of activism to emerge, giving greater opportunities for social movements to mobilise, influence and infiltrate mainstream society. Bennett reiterates this point by describing our recent history as one marked by "impressive levels of global activism, including mass demonstrations, sustained publicity campaigns against corporations and world development agencies, and the rise of innovative public accountability systems for corporate and governmental conduct. All of these activities seem to be associated in various ways with the Internet" (2003:6). Our networked society provides a conducive breeding ground for new forms of activism, with these social movements being products born from, but also expressions and manifestations of a technologically connected society, using information communication technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet as vital communications and operational tools. To demonstrate this argument, the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) social movement that sprung to life in Northern America in late 2010 will be used as a case study. Firstly key terms will be defined and a brief background to OWS will be presented, followed by an analysis of the use of the Internet and social media as key tools for access and mobilisation of new forms of activism, using OWS to demonstrate. The impact of ICT use by these new forms of activism will be discussed in terms of access, opportunities and barriers to the movements, as well as the relationship between virtual and physical participation in modern social movements. Finally, the concept of new forms of activism as accurate expressions and representations of today's networked society will be explored.

In the context of this essay, a *social movement* is defined as "a collectivity acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in the society or group of which it is a part" (Turner and Killian, 1987:223) and *mobilisation* as "organising for political action" (Harff and Gurr, 2004:96) or the process by which a community "becomes politicised on behalf of its collective interests and aspirations" (Esman, 1994:28). *Activism*, in the social and political sense, is defined as "attitudes and actions that challenge to persuade the social delivery of status, power, and resources" (Pérez, 2009:1), and a *network* is a "collection of links between elements of a unit", with characteristics including a group or system linked together

by inter-connected and complex connections and nodes (van Dijk, 2006:20). *Social structures* are "sets of organisational regularities produced by social actors, constantly challenged, and ultimately transformed by deliberate social action" (Castells, 2000c:22) and a *networked society* can be defined as "a society whose structure is comprised of networks powered by micro-electonic-based information and communication technologies" (Castells, 2004:2), with characteristics including social structures and activities organised around electronically-processed information networks; horizontal spread of power; communication not dependent on time or location, and relationships through media networks complementing face-to-face communication (van Dijk, 1991 & Castells, 2007, 2004, 2000a).

The case study used in this essay is OWS, a social movement and ongoing series of demonstrations initiated by the Canadian activist group Adbusters in July 2011 and launched with a first physical protest on September 17, 2011 in the New York City (NYC) Wall Street financial district. Inspired by popular uprisings in 2011 known as the *Arab Spring* across Egypt and Tunisia, OWS is an activist movement fighting against social and economic inequality, high unemployment rates, corporate corruption and influence of corporations in US government, with its main slogan "We are the 99%" referring to the growing difference in wealth between America's wealthiest 1% and the rest of the US population (OWS Manifesto, http://www.occupywallst.org/, 2011). With a base in NYC, the OWS movement has since spread to over 100 cities in the United States and over 1500 cities globally through the broader Occupy movement. However for this essay, the case study will focus on the NYC-based and Wall Street specific OWS movement.

According to Castells, for new forms of activism, "the Internet provides the essential platform for debate, their means of acting on people's mind, and ultimately serves as their most potent political weapon" (2007:13). OWS uses the Internet as a tool for access and mobilisation in a multitude of ways. These include the production of frameworks to define the movement and their fields of action through publishing manifestos, principles and policies; building networks through distinct online groups including think-tanks, legal, volunteer and media services; publishing resources such as online toolkits and how-to guides, and physically manifesting their political ideals through the online coordination of events including stand-ins, rallies and marches (Juris, 2005 & Moussa, 2011). There are various official websites that equally represent the OWS movement, including the NYC General Assembly (http://www.nycga.net/, 2011), OWS (http://www.occupywallst.org/, 2011) and Occupy Together

(http://www.occupytogether.org/, 2011), and this dispersed digital presence is an example of the horizontal organisational structure and decentralised nature of the OWS network. OWS's use of the Internet is not simply a political campaigning platform, but a crucial tool for the design and structure of the social movement, as well as its organisation and mobilisation.

Rosen argues that in the past, social movements would have assumed a distinct hierarchy for functional operation. However protestors involved in activism such as OWS can now use new horizontal models for effective organisation, based on the "insta-networks that spring up around metastatic information" (2011:55). Deleuze & Guattari use the metaphor of the *rhizome* to describe this horizontal organisational structure – a rhizome being a subterranean plant with a large underground root system and horizontal development of the plant stem, juxtaposed with a strong vertical structure above ground (1980: 190). The OWS network can therefore be described as *rhizomatic*, in the sense that its horizontal model and networking logic provides the movement with a strong support structure for effective operations.

Beyond the use of websites as digital communications tools by the OWS movement, many subversive Internet *memes* have arisen in the movement's political vocabulary, a meme being a concept in the form of a hyperlink, video, image, hashtag or catchphrase, which spreads virally through the Internet and propel the movements through micro-media communications channels (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). An example of an OWS meme is the image of a petite ballerina posing on the head of a bronze bull sculpture from Wall Street – a metaphor for the zen-like and resilient OWS movement taming the wild bull of a capitalist Wall Street and all it represents to the movement, including corporate greed, corruption and inequality of wealth (OWS Manifesto, http://www.occupywallst.org/, 2011). Memes such as this act as effective forms of propaganda for new forms of activism, spreading virally online through social media and blogs, and strengthening the brand and political messages in a new and potentially more effective way than traditional media channels and official promotional platforms.

The use of *culture jamming* is also an important tool of activism in a networked society - the "spread of ideas by playfully subverting the familiar ideas captured by popular cultural and commercial memes" (Bennett, 2003:28). New forms of activism use culture jamming to stage active subversion on the web and through media channels, for example staging virtual sit-ins, hacking or blocking access to websites, or

disrupting information flow through official communications channels (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002). Examples from the OWS movement include subverting well-known American cultural symbols and icons such as American dollar bills (*Occupy George*, 2011) and Obama's *Hope* campaign posters (Fairley, 2011) by distorting or hijacking their original messages with OWS information and imagery. The use of culture jamming can be a powerful and beneficial tool to the voice of activist movements, although due to its subversive and sometimes illegal nature, culture jamming can also damage the reputation of new forms of activism in the eye of their supporters and potential supporters. An example of this occurred with the re-appropriated *Hope* campaign, where Obama's face was replaced with an Anonymous mask, and the message was changed to "We HOPE you're with us". In this case OWS organisers distanced themselves from the work due to its "threatening nature" (Fairley, 2011) and the potential of it causing damage to their reputation. Extreme examples aside however, the ethics behind culture jamming show it to be an analytical device representing the subversive roots of the OWS movement and an important communications tool for modern activist campaigns.

The networked society provides a conducive environment for organising new forms of activism, largely through the technology at the movement's disposal. These movements often boast a hacker ethic to their use of ICTs and organisational structure, with the values of "free information, decentralised coordination, collaborative learning, peer recognition, and social service" (Juris, 2004:4). Similar to computer hackers, activist-hackers distort, reassemble and share information through underground communications networks. Characteristics of a hacker ethic include free and open circulation of information, autonomous groups with non-hierarchical structures, connectivity and diversifying networks, decentralised coordination, direct participation, open access and sharing, consensus-based decision-making and creative commons (Juris, 2005). Forms of hacking in modern activist movements are often illegal, including pirated communications channels, hacking official digital channels, websites and databases, and bypassing official censorship or surveillance (Garrett, 2006, Bennett, 2003, Moussa, 2011 & Scott and Street, 2000). A hacker ethic is an essential but risky characteristic of new forms of activism, in the sense that it propels the movement and keeps it one step ahead of authorities, but also presents the risk of legal action against the perpetrators or the organisation responsible, leading to demobilisation and delegitimisation of the movement. This is one reason why the members of one of the main activist groups involved in the OWS movement, *Anonymous*, work under aliases and do not reveal their true identities.

Social media is another widespread mobilisation tool for new forms of activism, with social media being defined as activities combining social interaction, technology, and user-generated content (Klang & Nolin, 2011). While some argue that social media has the potential to facilitate strong collective action and lead to wide-scale social progress (Sen et al, 2010 & Moussa, 2011), others do not believe it has the potential for social change. For example, author and commentator Malcolm Gladwell argues that social media leads to only a type of passive 'armchair activism' by making it "easier for activists to express themselves, but harder for that expression to have any impact" (2010). However it is hard to refute that in the 2011 Arab Spring protests, Islamic social movements relied heavily on social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook as mobilisation and communications tools, given existing strict government control and media censorship, and this utilisation played an important role in the advancement of their causes internationally and the widespread global support for their movements (Juris, 2004, Moussa, 2011). OWS's social media use is largely decentralised, with multiple profiles on specific social media networks (such as Facebook) and a plethora of independent blogs dedicated to the movement, rather than a limited number of official profiles. The use of Twitter hash tags is an example of this decentralised nature, with popular OWS hash tags including #owes, #occupy, #occupy together, #occupywallst, #sep17, #anonymous, #globalrevolution and #occupywallstnyc (Twitter, http://www.twitter.com, 2011).

At an early stage OWS recognised the potential barriers to the use of mainstream social media as communications tools, with OWS organisers explaining that with the movement being "so heavily based around the check and balance of corporate power", relying on mainstream social media or corporate communications platforms placed them too much under corporate control and government surveillance: "If we'd used a mass text message, or Twitter, it would have been easy for the police to track us down" (DeGroot as quoted by Rosen, 2011). Instead, OWS utilises a series of independent open-source blogs and other digital platforms licensed under creative commons, such as Wordpress, for their official communications channels.

Mobile technologies and telecommunications networks also provide valuable communications channels for modern activist movements, with networking tools such as cell-phone reception, wireless internet and mobile instant-messaging services used to coordinate movements of groups, communicate across diverse protest locations, and easily record and disseminate information and documentation of protest events (Garrett, 2006). However, heavy reliance on these mobile networks can be problematic

or even destructive for social movements due to the fact that government and corporations often have control over these networks. For example, if activists depend on cell phones to coordinate action and these actions become threatening to the interests of those with power, the networks can easily be monitored or disrupted, therefore demobilising activities. An example of this was seen after the UK riots of 2011 when Blackberry assisted police in an investigation to convict rioters through the investigation of archived communications across their network (Rosen, 2011 & Halliday, 2011). Morozov argues that modern activists are not careful enough when using social media and telecommunications, using the examples that they "give Iran's secret services superb platforms for gathering open source intelligence about the future revolutionaries … Once regimes used torture to get this kind of data; now it's freely available" (as quoted by Gaffney, 2011:7).

According to Cleaver, through modern forms of activism we are seeing the emergence of an "electronic fabric of struggle" (as quoted in Juris 2005:2). However this does not necessarily mean modern protests are comprised of solely digital activity. The distinction between virtual and physical elements of modern social movements is often exaggerated, whereas in reality there is an intrinsic link between the two. Online activist networks are not a 'place apart' but rather play a crucial role in both access to and mobilisation of physical OWS activity, with online networks strengthening offline networks, and vice versa (Spyridakis et al, 2009 & Juris, 2005). Modern social movements actively encourage online contributors to extend their participation to a physical level, for example the slogan of the email discussion list provider *Rise Up* is "get off the Internet - we'll see you in the streets!" (*Rise Up*, http://www.riseup.net, 2011). OWS organisers also highlight the importance of physical participation within the movement: "we talk to each other in various physical gatherings and virtual people's assemblies … and then we go out and seize a square of singular symbolic significance and put our asses on the line to make it happen" (Occupy Together, 2011). When activists participate in physical activities, they often still engage in digital forms of activism, "moving back and forth between online and offline political activity, using the Internet as the social movement's technological architecture" (Juris, 2005:4). Some theorists even argue that participating in digital activism may actually better educate a protester on their cause, with campaigns appearing more "transnationally composed and politically integrated" for those whose initial engagement with a social movement is online (Gillian, 2008:19). Despite the level of physical participation in modern activism varying by individual organisation and social movement, it is clear that today's networked society effectively rallies support for physical activism and

mobilises participation in off-line events, as seen by recent large-scale physical OWS protests in NYC and beyond.

The Canadian Security Intelligence Service noted of recent political activism campaigns: "The Internet has breathed new life into the anarchist philosophy, permitting communication and coordination without the need for a central source of command, and facilitating coordinated actions with minimal resources and bureaucracy" (as quoted in Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002:469). However, whilst the Internet and other ICTs are valuable communications and networking tools to social movements such as OWS, it must be remembered that widespread activism existed and operated effectively, long before the widespread use of the Internet. The power of ICTs in a global social movement will always have roots in a deeply human context, including the willingness of activists to "share, merge and tolerate diverse political identities" and the "perception that vast and complex problems have escaped the regulatory grasp of governments and nations" (Bennett, 2003:17). Generalisations must not be made about the absolute power of ICTs over new forms of activism as networks can be effectively sustained without its widespread use, examples in the 20th Century including the Vietnam War protests and the Prague Spring and Uprising of 1968. Garrett reiterates this point with the argument that "despite evidence that ICT use is producing significant social change, [it] does not mean that the changes identified are inherent to the technology. Used in different contexts, technologies yield different effects" (2006:217). In fact in some cases the use of ICTs and the ways in which technology is used can have negative consequences on social movements, "contributing to social ills, including violent conflict escalations, overwhelming flows of misinformation, and political polarisation" (2006:216). It is therefore important that new forms of activism are assessed on their own circumstances in terms of their relationship with technology and ICTs.

To conclude, I put forward Castells' description of new forms of activism as political, instant, multi-modal, viral, horizontal, selective, self-reflective, local and global, fundamentally political and "proposing and practicing direct, deliberative democracy based on networked democracy ... based on local communities and virtual communities in interaction" (http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/1736/, 2011). The networked society not only provides a framework for modern social movements but also births new models for the creation of alternate forms of social, political and economic structures at the same time. One of the exciting challenges

of using OWS as a case study is its currency, with the future, scale and longer-term impacts of this social movement yet to be seen. However, through witnessing the rise of movements such as OWS, it can already be claimed that we have entered a new era of activism, born of, manifested by and operating through the matrix of a networked society. Paradoxically, perhaps it was a realisation in the limits of technology in our networked society that prompted the rise of the OWS movement in the first place, as Mattelaart states "each new generation revives the 'redemptive discourse' of liberating effects of new communication technology, only to be disappointed when old hierarchies of power prove to persist" (2003:23). Born as a phenomenon of our 21st Century society, with all its opportunities and limitations, new forms of activism such as OWS are indeed expressions and representations of our increasingly networked world.

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