New forms of Activism in a Network Society

MJM17 Seminar Presentation
Michelle O’Brien // Student #10843673

Presentation Outline
1. Definitions of key terms
2. The Internet as a tool for mobilisation
3. OWS social media use
4. Impact of ICTs in offline participation (link between virtual & physical)
5. The Network Society as context for modern protest movements
6. Conclusion
7. Forum questions

Research questions
• What is the role of the Internet and other ICTs in global activism?
• How to ICTs impact offline participation?
• How is social media used in protest movements and what is the link between virtual and physical participation?
• What is the role of new social movements as an expression of today’s Network Society?

Definitions of key terms

Network Society
A Network Society is “a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by micro-electronics-based information and communication technologies” (Castells, 2004:2). Characteristics include:
• Information as a key factor
• Horizontally-spread power
• Communication not dependent on time or location
• Social structures and activities organised around electronically processed information networks
• Social networks processing and managing information through micro-electronic based technologies

Social Structures
Social structures can be defined as “sets of organisational regularities historically produced by social actors, and constantly challenged, and ultimately transformed by deliberate social action” (Castells, 2000c:22). Characteristics include:
• Arrangements of humans in relations of consumption, reproduction and production
• Meaningful communication coded by culture
• Structure made up of social patterns and relationships
Castells (2000c)

Case Study: Occupy Wall Street (OWS)
OWS is a current protest movement and ongoing series of demonstrations initiated by the Canadian activist group Adbusters in July 2011. With a base in NYC, the movement has since spread to over 100 cities in the United States and over 1500 cities globally. Facts about OWS:
• Began September 17, 2011 in New York City's Wall Street financial district
• Movement is inspired by popular uprisings in 2011 in Egypt and Tunisia, known as the Arab Spring
• Slogan is “We are the 99%” and refers to growing difference in wealth between America’s wealthiest 1% and the rest of the population
• Protests are against social and economic inequality, high unemployment rates, corporate corruption and influence of corporations in US government
• OWS has been followed by the broader Occupy movement of protests in other cities across America and around the world

Occupy Wall Street (http://www.occupywallst.org/, 2011)

The Internet as a Tool for Mobilisation (Slides 3 – 18)

OWS’s Charging Bull motif uses the image of a public sculpture of a bull near Wall Street, NYC. In the background protesters emerge from a cloud of tear gas. The text reads: “What is our one demand? #Occupy Wall Street, September 17th, Bring tent”. A possible interpretation of the image is a capitalist bull being tamed by the Zen stillness of a ballerina (Schwartz, 2011).

Many internet memes have arisen in the political vocabulary of the OWS movement, an internet meme being a concept, in forms such as a hyperlink, video, image, hashtag or catchphrase, which spreads virally through the Internet (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). The use of culture jamming is also an important tool of activism in a Network 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 a virtual ‘sit-in’, hacking or blocking access to official sites, or disrupting information flow on official websites (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002).

Culture jamming can also be seen as an analytic device to explain the roots of the OWS movement and an important tool used in its campaign strategies.

OWS websites include:
New York City General Assembly (http://www.nycga.net/, 2011)
Occupy Wall Street (http://www.occupywallst.org/, 2011)
Occupy Together (http://www.occupytogether.org/, 2011)
Occupy George (http://www.occupygeorge.com/, 2011)
Occupy Wish List (http://www.occupywishlist.org/, 2011)
These websites are not only political campaign websites, but are also tools for OWS's internal activities, organised around the working groups such as media, fundraising and alternative banking. Underlying the operations of these online hubs is a horizontal organisational structure that encourages anyone to participate in the movement. In this way the online presence of the OWS represents more than merely facilitating the movement; it also inspires the design and structure of the movement (Rosen, 2011).

OWS Social Media Use (Slides 19 – 28)

OWS social media presence is largely decentralised, for example there are multiple Facebook pages and blogs dedicated to the movement rather than single official profiles. The use of Twitter hashtags is an example of the decentralised nature of this social media presence, with popular OWS hashtags including: #ows #occupy #occupytogether #occupywallst #occupywallstreet #sep17 #anonymous #globalrevolution #occupywallstnyc (Twitter, (http://www.twitter.com, 2011). This decentralisation is a possible reason why the OWS movement is not ‘trending’ as highly on Twitter as organisers had hoped. This has lead to conspiracy stories that Twitter is censoring the movement which Twitter claims are incorrect (Social Media Collective, http://socialmediacollective.org, 2011).

While some argue that social networks have the potential to facilitate strong collective action and lead to wide-scale progress (Sen et al, 2010, Moussa, 2011, Garrett, 2005), others are staunchly anti-social media when it comes to listing effective mobilisation tools for protest movements. Gladwell (2010) fits into the latter category, arguing that “social networks make it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact. The instruments of social media are well suited to making the existing social order more efficient. They are not a natural enemy of the status quo… Social networks are effective at increasing participation—by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires”. Heavy reliance by protest movements on ICTs, especially mobile technologies and mainstream social media also presents the danger of demobilisation. For example, government and elite corporations often have ownership of these networks and
therefore do have the power to close services down (such as cutting mobile phone reception or closing down websites) should their uses become to threatening (Garrett, 2006).

Impact of ICTs in Offline Participation (link between virtual & physical) (Slides 29 – 34)

“The beauty of this new formula, and what makes this novel tactic exciting, is its pragmatic simplicity: we talk to each other in various physical gatherings and virtual people’s assemblies … we zero in on what our one demand will be, a demand that awakens the imagination and, if achieved, would propel us toward the radical democracy of the future … 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, http://occupytogether.org, 2011)

Gillan argues that those encountering protest movements first and foremost on the web, the campaign appears more “transnationally composed and politically integrated than for those encountering it offline” (2008:19). It can also be claimed that protest movement supporters are “disproportionately likely to rely on digital communications media, overwhelmingly receiving their information about the Iraq crisis through e-media” (2008:2, Bennett and Givens 2006, 1-17). Protest movements such as OWS also 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). While ICTs have a link to both online and offline participation in protest movements like OWS, there is little evidence to suggest that the Network Society is causing an eradication of physical forms of protest.

The Network Society as context for modern protest movements (Slides 35 – 36)

According to Cleaver, through the use of the Internet in modern protest movements we are seeing the emergence of an “electronic fabric of struggle” (as quoted in Juris 2005:2). The Network Society provides a conducive environment for organising modern protest movements and framework for:

- producing high quality information and content by ordinary people
- creating collective identity and large scale interactive communities or networks
- promoting interaction and dialogue and assisting action and mobilisation
- promoting fundraising and resource generation
- making horizontal linkages between and replications of content
- accelerating and extending the diffusion of social movement information internationally
- facilitating personal (micro media) communications enter mass media channels
- bypassing censorship and being fundamentally resistant to state regulation


While not necessary anarchistic, protest movements in a Network Society do however boast a hacker ethic. Like computer hackers, activist-hackers “receive, combine, and recombine cultural codes, in this case, political signifiers, freely sharing and circulating information about projects, mobilisations, strategies, tactics, and ideas through global communication networks” (Juris, 2005:12). Hacker ethics include:

- free and open circulation of information
- autonomous groups with non-hierarchical structures
- connectivity and widening and diversifying networks
- decentralised coordination & direct participation
- open access and sharing
- collaborative learning & peer recognition
- consensus-based decision-making
- importance on social service & creative commons

Juris (2005)

OWS is not the first protest movement that has used the framework of the Network Society for mobilisation. In the recent 2011 Arab Spring protests and subsequent revolution, Islamic protest movements benefited greatly from the use of ICTs, especially given strict government censorship of the media. The Network Society allowed them to advance their causes internationally, gain global support for their movement and intervene in
political spheres both locally and internationally. Other examples of protest movement that has used the Network Society for mobilisation include:

- 2011 - Iranian protests, Iran
- 2003 - Iraq War Protest, USA
- 2000 - Palestinian Second Intifada, Palestine
- 2000 - Anti-globalisation Protests, Prague, Czech Republic
- 1999 - Protest against the World Trade Organisation, Seattle, USA

Sources: Moussa (2011)

Castells (2011) describes internet based social networks and wireless networks as being political, instant, multimodal, viral, horizontal, selective, self-reflective, as well as being local and global at the same time. He argues that they are very political in a fundamental sense and "propose and practice direct, deliberative democracy based on networked democracy ... based on local communities and virtual communities in interaction" (Castells, http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/1736/, 2011). The Network Society not only provides a framework for modern protest movements such as OWS but also acts as a model for creating new forms of social, political and economic structures.

Conclusion

Gladwell declares, "Where activists were once defined by their causes, they are now defined by their tools" (2010). However perhaps it was a realisation in the limits of these tools, in this case the power of ICTs in a Network Society that prompted 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), highlighting the paradox between liberation through ICTs and the over-arching corporate and government control of technologies.

It can be claimed that power in the Networked Society is shifting away from traditional institutions such as the state, capitalist forms and the mainstream media, towards more disseminated groups, technologies and communications tools: “Power is no longer concentrated in institutions, organisations or symbolic controllers. It is diffused in global networks of wealth, power, information and images” Castells, (2007: 167). This can be seen in the growing power of ICTs as an important tool for new forms of activism. For example on June 16, 2011, in the height of the Arab Spring Revolution, the US government requested that Twitter postpone updates to the service by “highlight[ing] to them that this was an important form of communication” in both external information exchange as well as internal organisation of the movement (Gaffney, 2011:1). Thus, the Network Society provides a conducive breeding ground for the rise of modern protest movements, with these new forms of activism being intrinsically linked to the growing power of technology in our society.

Forum Questions

Please select 2 questions to answer in the Student Central forum.

1. How have ICTs, in particular the Internet, changed the way you personally engage with social and political issues?
2. When people participate in activism via social media, do you believe they are doing anything meaningful? Is the line as straightforward as Internet activism and physical activism?
3. Select an image from the presentation and explain how its design and message fits into the framework of a Network Society.
4. Mattelaart (2003: 23) 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”. This quote shows the paradox between the liberation through ICTs and the over-arching corporate and government control of these technologies. Do you think this sentiment resonates within OWS movement?
5. Are modern protest movements such as OWS an expression of today’s Network Society? In what ways do you think they are related?
Bibliography


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Images / Video


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We Are the 99% (2011) [Image]. We Are the 99% Tumblr Homepage, Tumblr. Retrieved from URL (accessed November 22, 2011) http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com

Further Readings


Header image: presentation notes