Social movements and media representation: the case of Occupy
Anastasia Kavada
Trailer of documentary on the Occupy movement – explains what the movement was about (quite positive towards the movement)
Main characteristics

• **Heterogeneity:** uniting diverse people and issues

• **Decentralization:** no single identifiable leader, ‘leaderfulness’, light structure, non-hierarchical

• **Occupation of public space**

• **Building experimental communities of equals**
Main characteristics

Reinventing democracy:
- Emphasis on participation and inclusiveness
- Practicing participatory democracy - open assemblies, consensus decision-making
An Asymmetric Relationship:

social movements need the media more than the media need social movements
Functions of the media for activists

• Mobilization

• Validation/ legitimization

• Scope enlargement

(Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993)
Mobilization & Scope Enlargement

- Diffusion of protest - transmission of information about events
- Strengthening feelings of solidarity and collective identity
Validation/Legitimization

- Movements are taken more seriously by power-holders if they are portrayed positively in the media.

- Mass media coverage prevents repression of social movements.
Media bias

But social movements and protests are often marginalized, trivialized, and misrepresented in the mainstream media.

Selection bias:

- Location, size and intensity/violence of the event
- Issue type
- News routines and news agency characteristics
- Timing
Media bias
Media bias

Reporting violence towards property during the student protests in London (2010)
Media bias

Description bias:
• Focus on violence
• Trivialization and personalization
• Focus on internal conflicts
• Neutralizing or undermining movement agendas
Why?

- **State** regulation and censorship
- **Market** pressures, media ownership and commercialisation (Emphasis on what sells and on trivial news)
- **News** routines and news values (Objectivity/neutrality, Balance, Newsworthiness, Norms regarding sources - e.g. preference for elite sources)
The current media system

“Political communication now occurs in complex hybrid assemblages of older and newer media, as a diverse array of actors, ranging from large professional news organizations to elite politicians to engaged citizens, participate in an incessant struggle to shape public discourse and define the political agenda”

(Chadwick 2013, p. 159)
Activist Media Strategies

The quadruple ‘A’:
Abstention
Adaptation
Attack
Alternatives

(Rucht, 2004)
Alternatives and Adaptation

Alternatives: Social movements and activists create their own independent media

Adaptation: ‘Acceptance/exploitation of the mass media’s rules and criteria to influence coverage positively’ (Rucht, 2004, p. 37)

Where does the use of commercial social media platforms fit?
#OCCUPYWALLSTREET

A shift in revolutionary tactics.
#OCCUPYWALLSTREET

Are you ready for a Tahrir moment?

On Sept 17, flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street.

Alright you 90,000 redeemers, rebels and radicals out there,
Activists use increasingly sophisticated techniques to spread their message through social media.

**Example:** the branding work of Adbusters around Occupy Wall Street - the name of the movement itself was a hashtag.
Rallying around a common cause

The internet allows the quick and effective creation of ‘insurgent communities’ around a common cause

• More than 1,500 Facebook pages created by the Occupy movement (Gaby and Caren 2012)
• Creating a collective identity and building solidarity
Diffusion: spreading tactics

Open source protest:
Making the tactics, knowledge and 'code' of the movement available to everyone
• Fosters learning
• Makes mobilizations easier to spread as activists in different locations can easily adopt and adapt the movement’s tactics
Bearing witness and reporting from the streets

Makeshift media centres ensure that what happens in the streets quickly finds its way online - Set up by experienced media activists and also offering training.
Video of police violence during the first weeks of Occupy Wall Street – this particular video mobilized many people to join the protest (together with the arrests on Brooklyn bridge around that time)
Ability to quickly post raw footage and reports from the ground helps to:

• bear witness and challenge the official narrative of events
• protect protesters from the authorities during demonstrations
• de-legitimize the tactics used by the police
• DIY streams had up to 80,000 unique viewers per day at the peak of the mobilizations
• Activists live-streamed general assemblies and meetings increasing the transparency of the movement and virtual participation (see Constanza-Chock 2012)
Livestreaming videos:
- Raw and unedited video
- Immediacy
- Often boring...
- DIY and amateur nature
- Openness and visibility

The difficult role of the livestreamer:
Targeted by the police
Demanding task physically
Sometimes accused of being
Streamer Journalist Code of Ethics

Preamble

The act of streaming may be used for journalism, documentation of controversial events or for entertainment purposes. Streaming can provide personal protection when involved in situations that may have legal implications. Those engaged in one or more of these activities may be considered a Streamer or a Citizen Journalist. Due to the many categories of streaming, as well as differing journalistic styles, which may include advocacy journalism and gonzo journalism, the technique is sometimes treated with contempt by law enforcement as well as the traditional journalistic community.

One who is claiming to be a Streamer Journalist needs to operate under the established journalistic framework despite possibly using streaming for other purposes. It would...
Officer John Pike Pepper spraying Occupy activists at the UC Davis campus
‘Memewars’: Casually Pepper-Spray Everything Cop

Meme: a small unit of culture (or message) that can travel quickly and be appropriated and adapted easily

For an analysis of this meme see: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/casually-pepper-spray-everything-cop
‘We are the 99%’ Tumblr

- **Personalizing** the message of the movement makes it easier to spread and inspire solidarity (Gaby and Caren 2012)
- **Tumblr** allowed different people to upload their message, facilitating an open collaborative process of creating the story of the movement and helping multiple voices to be heard
Alternative News

OccupyWallStreet.net is brought to you by the NYC General Assembly to provide news, information and inspiration from the occupations of Wall Street and around the world.

Featured Video

INfiltration as Federal Crime
In January, a woman from Project Veritas calling herself Laura Lewis attended a Black Lives Matter demonstration in Staten Island led by Erica Garner, the daughter of Eric Garner.

In the News

Ferguson police antagonized Michael Brown protesters, DoJ report finds
1 day 3 hours ago

US Department of Justice report about August protests over teenager’s death finds officers inappropriately used tear gas and violated free speech rights.
Read More

Israel Blocks Flotilla Of Foreign Activists From Reaching Gaza
2 days 23 hours ago

Activists said the boat had a few dozen Europeans, including politicians, on board and had been headed for Gaza, the blockaded Palestinian territory.
Read More

http://occupywallstreet.net/
Alternative News

http://theoccupiedtimes.org/

The Occupied Times
OF LONDON

#01
26OCT2011

HERE TO STAY

It has been nearly two weeks since the initial chaotic scenes on October 15 when police battled protesters, arresting eighty-two on suspicion of disorderly conduct and public order offences. Since then the camp has turned into a peaceful, well-organized community - complete with kitchen, library, computer room, waste management and power generation - and speakers at the camp's daily general assemblies have frequently voiced plans to stay "until Christmas." German student Nikita Muñoz told the Occupied Times he plans to stay as long as the camp remains. "I'm going to stay here as long as it exists; the thing is going to persist until we reach some change," he said.

All work done at the camp is voluntary, with occupiers leading their support when needed. Meanwhile food, clothing, equipment and monetary donations have flooded in, mostly gifted to the occupiers from people passing by.

One camper, Tom, told the Occupied Times he had put his experience as a civil servant to use in the information tent, a first point of call for many visitors - along with some tents in the kitchen, tech tent and setting up Finsbury Square. Since his arrival on the 15th he had seen the camp become more and more organized, he said: "No one's first week getting the structure together - the working groups - and getting people used to our direct democracy." The camp is founded on direct democracy.
The Supermax in Wrexham

Eighty-five thousand and counting. This is the number of bodies incarcerated at any one time in Britain’s crumbling and overcrowded prisons. It’s a figure that has almost doubled over the past 20 years, a

Endless Accumulation, Endless (Unpaid) Work?

Every civilisation must decide what is, and what is not, valuable. Marxists occasionally speak of a “law of value.” It is not a concept easily translated into everyday politics, or

Putting Feet On The Ground

I was heartened by the United Families and Friends Campaign against deaths in custody (UFFC) annual march in October 2014, even though it was still small. In 2013, around 100 people marched on
Alternatives

Allow social movements to:

• Express and disseminate their own values and ideas in their own language

• Develop networks of contributors, people who produce, share and disseminate alternative messages

• Organize media production according to different values (e.g. more horizontal, de-professionalization)

• Build a repository of knowledge, a cultural memory of the movement and the campaign
Video from the Guardian showing a meeting of the press working group of Occupy Wall Street [notice the ways in which activists discuss and take decisions – i.e. working in alternative ways that express specific ideals – and their analysis of the movement’s depiction on the mainstream media]
Adaptation

• Media training
• Cultivating relationships with journalists
• Following the news cycle of the mainstream media
• Lists of contacts
• Tours of the camps
• Regular press releases
Adaptation

The role of the spokesperson
Attempts to depersonalize/democratize the role of the spokesperson:

• List of different interviewees and media training
• Spokespeople were anonymous or pseudonymous
• Presented themselves as individuals (but as someone–as–anyone) not as representatives
Al Jazeera short report on the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations [notice how activists speaking to the media avoid appearing as representatives, for instance by speaking in the first person singular- the strategy of course has limitations as one of the activists is presented as an ‘Organiser’ and the other one as a ‘Protester’]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KB_xXUIWne8
Social media power dynamics

Social media design rules call for a collective voice: e.g. @occupy1sx

‘Organizational twitter handle is for organization (movement). Not personal causes/shout-outs. Keep it relevant to our tweeps (followers). Avoid “I” statements (**except** when being arrested, when you can tweet in 1st person all you want!)’

(Tweeting for @OccupyWallStNYC)

Occupy Seattle: adding initials of the administrator after each Facebook post
The problems of adaptation

“Movement-media communication is like a conversation between a monolingual and a bilingual speaker. The media speak mainstreamese, and movements are pushed to adopt this language to be heard since journalists are prone to misunderstand or never hear the alternate language and its underlying ideas.”

(Gamson & Wollesfeld 1993: 119)
Scene from the television series ‘The Newsroom’ slightly satirizing Occupy Wall Street (not very accurately...) but demonstrating the attitude of the mainstream media towards the movement and some of the difficulties that Occupy activists had with regards to engaging with journalists.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4lqyfLyqUs
• Need for narrow and 'clear' demands
• Need for clear leaders
Social Media Participation

Social media users participated:
• as spectators of the assemblies through livestreaming
• in sharing and circulating information to their own networks
• in liking and commenting – affecting the information architecture on platforms like Facebook
• as metrics of resonance/success
Conclusions

• Distrust of the mainstream media but attempts to build relationships in ways that respected the movement’s values

• Emphasis on alternative media production

• Use of social media for mobilization and diffusion of information

• Participatory and decentralized process of content creation leads to a dispersed narrative