I. Introduction

Media and social movements have since long had an intertwining relationship. Social movements have depended on media coverage to get their messages heard, while journalists in turn have used social movements as sources of news, public debate and spectacle. In the past, the mediums of newspapers, radio, and television have played central roles in the shaping and communication of social movements. Today, however, we find ourselves in a digital media climate with an abundance of resources and information situated on the Internet. Many of these resources are now found on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. How this switch is impacting on the organization and communication of contemporary social movements is thus a vital area of analysis for communication scholars interested in the ramifications of such movements.

There are numerous questions to be debated and researched when it comes to the phenomenon of social movements and what role social media is playing in aiding them in their successes or contributing to their failures. When a social movement is narrowed down into its specifics, however, contextual characteristics become important, such as geographical location and political stabilization. A social movement that takes place in London is going to have different parameters and ramifications than a social movement that takes place in Beijing. The way in which
authority ruling governments control traditional media has certainly promoted the use of social media platforms, as citizens who wish to put out their own opinions can take to social media platforms to combat political views or framed news stories at the behest of the government, but, one can equally look at the governments of Syria, Iran, or Libya to get an understanding of how an authoritarian regime can also use information provided on social media platforms in disastrous and inhumane manners (Morozov 2009: 11). Despite this mixed record in geopolitical arenas from North Africa to the Unite States, social media have become coordinating tools for many political movements, just as most of the world's authoritarian governments (and, alarmingly, an increasing number of democratic ones) are trying to limit access to it (Shirky, 2011: 2), and it may thus be seen as an increasingly important arena for social movements.

Therefore this article does not attempt to side with arguments of social media as being a savior or the answer to the goals of social movements. The aim is to discuss how social media can be understood further by speaking with activists who are involved in using social media tools within a social movement. The prevalence of social media and its relation to traditional media in the context of the Occupy Wall Street social movement is here the main focal point. I aim to explore this theme by using qualitative interview materials gathered from a previous research project that focused on the burgeoning relationship of the two medias. In this article I have chosen to develop findings from selected interviews with two specific activists from different generations of activism, in order to illustrate how this progression can be seen through actual experiences of activists; discussing these two first hand accounts of how social media has come to be perceived as ‘their media’ and what this could suggest for the future of social movements. Before introducing the interviews, however, I will briefly outline the theoretical context for the study, as well as discussing some of the previous and recent analyses of social movements and media.

II. The public sphere, the Internet and social media
In writing about social movements and the media a possible starting point is the highly influential theory of the public sphere, as developed by Jürgen Habermas in The Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere (1962). He emphasizes the
public sphere as ‘a realm of our social life in which something approaching a public opinion can be formed’, neither institutionally controlled nor dominated by private interests, as a necessary requirement for a well-functioning democracy (ibid: 49). According to Habermas the public sphere also relies on rational and critical discussion between private individuals on public matters, to which access is guaranteed to all citizens. While his historical claims of the bourgeois public sphere have been criticized (see Calhoun, 1992 and Couldry et. al. in Butsch, 2007: 28-42), we can today think of the media as providing the primary spaces for such discussion (Butsch, 2007) – and thus also for the opportunities for social movements to play a part in public debate and discussion. Involvement and participation in the public sphere has been changing throughout history, with many of the changes coinciding with the growth of technology and its subsequent affects on our media. From newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet: all manipulated the abilities of citizens’ engagement in the public sphere on different communicative levels (ibid).

Discussing the mediated public sphere, Roger Silverstone (2007: 31) describes an accompanying term, *mediapolis*: “The mediated public sphere where contemporary political life increasingly finds its place, both at national and global levels, and where the materiality of the world is constructed through (principally) electronically communicated public speech and action.” As the public sphere has changed in the decades since Habermas coined the phrase, it has certainly come to a point in our modern culture that is overwhelmingly electronic indeed, and with the surge of technologies growth, it might be relevant to speak of a digital mediated public sphere. Thus the relevance and significance of our life in the mediapolis is digitized – and, as stated in the introduction, one of the platforms in which people are currently taking part of public debate and information is online via social media platforms. The wide availability of individually controlled wireless communication has the potential to effectively bypass the mass-media system as a source of information, and to create a new form of public space (Castells et. al. 2007: 185). This public space has continued online with the emergence of social media platforms, along with the mobile technologies that they have bonded themselves with.

---

1 Social media platforms are user driven, providing communication and information on an instantaneous and global scale. They are transparent and provide a place for engagement, participation, and creation anywhere at anytime.
2 The website Internet World Stats, which aggregates information from a variety of regional providers, estimates that between 2000 and 2010 the number of people with access to the Internet grew by 448.8 percent, from
It is noted however that technology does not determine society: it is society, and can only be understood in social terms as a social practice. The uses of wireless communication are fundamentally shaped and modified by people and organizations, on the basis of their interests, values, habits, and projects (ibid: 246). The way in which social media platforms are used by protesters is therefore certainly shaped by their specific geo-political context. Thus, it is not that traditional media is being left out or has been eradicated by any means from public discourse, but that social media are becoming more prevalent and very accessible to citizens:

Digital media, and the Internet in particular are transforming our means of gathering information and communicating with each other and contributing to both these practices through creative production. In informational terms, use of the Internet clearly has the potential to influence the capacity of ‘ordinary’ citizens and resource-poor social or political groups to gain information and expertise through vastly increasing the range of information that is freely available to any Internet user, on virtually any subject imaginable. (Bimber 2002, cited in Fenton 2012:123)

This process of information gathering and communication with one another is certainly one to highlight for a social movement. When the audience can be influenced via social media platforms, and on a worldwide scale, the speed and news coverage of social movements has arguably made a historic leap. In a quite a short amount of time, versus that of the progression for traditional media.

Discussing the mediated public sphere in relation to the expansion of digital media and especially the rise of the Internet, some scholars have, then, considered these developments as potentially rejuvenating the public sphere, providing access to widespread information for interaction and public debate (see Nightingale 2011). With the spread of social media such hopes have been further developed, as exemplified by Malcolm Gladwell (2010), who argues that social media are contributing to upend traditional relationship between political authorities and the popular, making it easier for the powerless to collaborate, coordinate, and give voice to their concerns. John Baglow (2011: 2) likewise, in commenting on social media,

360,985,492 to 1,966,514,816. This represents 28.7 percent of the world’s population. These numbers are on a global perspective, the highest growth was in Africa, where 10.9 percent now have Internet access (from 4,514,400 to 110,931,700, an increase of 2,357.3 percent) (2000-2010) and the Middle East, where Internet access now stands at 29.8 percent of the population (from 3,284,800 to 65,240,946) an increase of 1,825.3 percent.

www.Internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
states that “the new technologies...are egalitarian, instant, uncircumscribed, freely collective (one can opt in or opt out at any time), anonymous, and nonlinear – and hence deeply subversive.” Such ideas are eloquently summarized by Richard Butsch (2007: 162) in a discussion of how new media in general has had implications for analyses of the public sphere:

New media are interactive, conflating the information supply and conversation of this old conception and relocating both in a simultaneous virtual space. They disaggregate audiences, integrate media use into everyday life, and reconceive users’ relation to media...they share a digital foundation that has enabled rapid convergence of video and audio technologies...{new media} it has dissolved the dichotomy between public and private space, a social distinction underlying traditional concepts of public spheres...Today everyday life is immersed in media. Whatever we are doing some form of media is present...the interactive capacities of new media have been hailed as the basis for a new form of public sphere.

Thus, the public sphere can be considered to have developed when looking within the context of the public’s relationship with media, the development of the Internet and digital media technologies, and the recent growth of the social media platforms.

Critical voices in respects of how the Internet is not promoting democracy and is conversely limiting the possibility for democratic public discussion and action have also been stated. Natalie Fenton (2012: 131) for example argues that a lot of the information put out on social media simply personal or entertainment-oriented, and meaningless in terms of public sphere discourse, and that traditional media sources moreover use information from social media for those purposes, and that the public sphere therefore is shrinking despite the abundance of platforms to put out media and information:

This narrowing of the public sphere appears to be happening despite the expansion of media space and a multiplicity of media platforms and claims regarding interactivity, speed, and the international reach of online communications.

This was certainly a major factor in the context of the Occupy movement as much of the initial messages behind the movement were against the capitalist political system embodied by the United States. Even with traits such as speed and international reach in the early stages of Occupy Wall Street many traditional media sources chose to not
cover the movement and much of the information and interaction that did occur was on social media platforms although the impact was certainly not immediate, as some had initially hoped for in the beginning (see Schmidt, 2012). Lastly it is important to cite the point made by Fenton (2012: 132) that “…social and political elites have greater cultural and economic capital at their disposal to harness the power of social media to their advantage.” This is nothing new as political elites in the United States have often been in charge of framing and shaping news via traditional news corporations (NBC, CNN, FOX, CBS, MSNBC, Bloomberg), and it is thus a prevalent point that this would remain possible even as the activists may use social media for communication and organization. She warns in emphasizing communicational desires and motivations – the need to connect and relate to others (which we should acknowledge as a major facet of social networking and par of its vast success) - we should not fall into the trap of diminishing the importance of who is communicating what to whom (ibid: 127).

III. Media and social movements: previous and contemporary theory
Looking further into how media and social movements are now transforming their prior relationships to one another it is important to take in to the context of Occupy Wall Street the reasons why there is such a bond between social movement and media. In Movements and Media as Interacting Systems, William A. Gamson & Gadi Wolfsfeld (1993: 115) explain in simple terms the conversation had by both parties: “Send my message,” say the activists and “make me news,” say the journalists. This emphasizes the inter-reliance by both parties, but also the different needs and approaches had by a social movement versus that of a traditional media organization. However, looking at this description from the contemporary perspective there has been almost 20 years of growth in the interaction of media and movements, and as stated prior new media can be argued to having changed this relationship in a number of important ways. Thus, thinking about the nature of these transactions in the current context, with the implementation the social media platforms at the activists’ disposal arguably requires an analysis with those who are actively participating in modern social movements and how the transformation has spawned out of the actions of once used during the time of traditional media being the only choice for activists.

Yet, Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993: 116) list three major purposes on why social movements need traditional media to appear relevant. Firstly, “mobilization”,
which includes not only the gathering and uniting of protesters themselves but also of their message, and what specifically the collective group is rising up against. Secondly, “validation”, alludes to getting coverage via the mainstream media. When traditional media was the only source of information it had never been deemed easy to get coverage and even with the rise of social media platforms it still isn’t considered so. Media presence is seen as validating although there might be misrepresentation or framing of a message. Coverage alone puts the spotlight on the social movement and gives it validation to the fact that if it is relevant enough for traditional media then it is having an impact in the public sphere. Thirdly, Gamson and Wolfsfeld discuss how validation could lead to “scope enlargement” to a wider public, as those unaware of the actions or perhaps the reasons behind a movement will become aware naturally within their daily media consumption, since, as mentioned by Butsch (2007) in the case of new media, many societies could today be described as saturated by media. Taking a look at these three purposes is helpful when attempting to explain in further detail the relationships fostered between traditional media and the activists of social movement. That

Expanding on the idea shared in Gamson & Wolfsfeld’s writing that movements, then, depend on the media to generate public sympathy for their challenge (1993: 116), the dependence on traditional news media might be seen as subsiding with the emergence of the new media, such as social media, blogs, and emergent independent news organizations. The opposing point to be addressed is to what extent and how important a social movement like Occupy is to news copy of traditional media. Movement protesters tend to view mainstream media outlets not as autonomous and neutral actors but as agents and handmaidens of dominant groups whom they are challenging (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993: 119). There is not an escape from the traditional media entirely and may not be any time in the near future, they will be present because they are stalwarts and will continue to have their readership and subscribers. Two hypotheses brought up by Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) are points that will offer avenues of analysis:

1. The greater the resources, organization, professionalism, coordination, and strategic planning of a movement, the greater its media standing and the more prominent its preferred frame will be in media coverage of relevant events and issues (1993: 121).
2. The more the media actor emphasizes visual material in its news production; the more likely it is to produce action strategies that emphasize spectacle, drama, and confrontation (1993: 124).

In their contemporary research *Democratic media activism through the lens of social movement theory* William Carroll & Robert Hackett (2006: 88) explain that for media activism, alternative media are not simply a political instrument but a collective good in themselves, as they are short-circuit corporate control of public communication and foster democratic conversations. So although a movement may be aiming for a greater media standing as explained in the first hypothesis there are still gatekeepers on both end of the spectrum whether they be politically charged or held by the traditional media entity itself. Yet, in regards to the second hypotheses it is a fact that visual material can be more easily produced today via mobile devices like a Smartphone and that content can be easily uploaded and sent out to a wide audience via social media platforms.

In terms of communication in contemporary society is the theory of mass self-communication by Manuel Castells, as he explains how a YouTube video post for example might have an audience of millions, but it was produced by an individual and will eventually be accessed by an individual too. The forms of communication in his theory go further to explain in this article the affect of social media in social movements (2009: 55):

The three forms of communication (interpersonal, mass communication, and mass self communication) coexist, interact, and complement each other rather than substituting for one another. What is historically novel, with considerable consequences for social organization and cultural change, is the articulation of all forms of communication into a composite, interactive, digital hypertext that includes, mixes, and recombines in their diversity the whole range of cultural expressions conveyed by human interaction.

This whole range of cultural expression is certainly important in terms of a social movement, which aims to get a message out to the public. The values it is representing need to be understood by a wider audience than just protesters themselves. Human interaction was brought up as having an affect for the Occupy Wall Street movement, but much of that interaction and what was learned was then implemented with continued growth online via the ‘digital hypertext’ embodied by social media platforms.
In further discussion on social media being predicated on self-communication to a mass audience, Fenton (2012: 134) explains that:

An increase in emphasis of the values of self-expression certainly seems to point to the development of new social habits. And if we accept that the public and private spheres are ever overlapping and interlinked in an online world, then they are also likely to have political consequences too.

The development of these ‘new social habits’ will have to wait for further research to fully understand their effects. It is certain that some of the major uprisings in the past year in North Africa, Europe, and the United States have been strongly backed by expressionism through a variety of social media platforms. As Christian Fuchs (2009: 95) explains in opposition of Castells (2009) of the possibilities offered up by the Internet in terms of counter power and creation of autonomous spaces – spaces that are autonomous from capital and state powers are not easy to come by. They certainly do no automatically exist in social media ‘but are invariably subsumed under the corporate logic that dominates.’ This does not mean that these spaces cannot exist in the future, but to understand how they might exist we have a critical analysis of what inhibits them (Fenton, 2012). As further research comes to light about the Arab Spring and the Occupy Protests for example it may become clear to what extent social media truly did affect outcomes or political change. Here, interviewing activists themselves cannot provide full answers to this wider question, but such an approach may however shed light on some of the uses, as well as benefits and hindrances of the social media tools in the opinions of activists present during a recent social movement, and it can therefore point to potential topics for continued research.

IV. A qualitative study on social media in the Occupy Wall Street Movement

This article is drawing on findings from a research report titled Social Movement & Social Media: A qualitative study of Occupy Wall Street (Clark, 2012). The report analyzed the responses of a small number of a range of role players involved with Occupy Wall Street, including representatives of law enforcement, journalists, and activists, based on in-depth, semi-structured, interviews that were carried out in the
spring of 2012. It is the aim of this article to specifically highlight the responses from the two activists in the report: one a more ‘traditional’ activist, aged 37, with his activist history rooted in U.S. war policy and Israel’s occupation of Palestine and the other a more ‘modern’ activist, aged 28, who has been involved in community and government issues on local and national levels. Although this highly limited sample is clearly not intended for any kind of generalization to a wider activist population, it is my conviction that this narrow frame allows for some elucidation on how social media, on an individual level, may be experienced and understood by some activists in this specific context and in relation to traditional media such as radio, newspapers and television within the mediated public sphere.

On September 17th, 2011 the social movement Occupy Wall Street began – this became the core of a movement that would lead to the ubiquitous term ‘Occupy’ – a rallying call against corporate greed, economic disparity, and political corruption (and in latter stages police brutality). The movement was picked up by other cities across America i.e. Occupy Oakland, Occupy Chicago and later globally i.e. Occupy London, Occupy Rome. The movement’s encampment was head quartered in Zuccotti Park outside of the world’s financial capital and New York Stock Exchange, both located around Wall Street in New York City. The reasons behind Occupy Wall Street are numerous and the movement’s agenda has sometimes been regarded as ill defined (see Klein, 2011). Citizens had become fed up with social and economic inequality and the relationship between the powerful corporations and government, and their ability to sway political agenda. This sentiment is illustrated in the title that many of the activists took to describe themselves as a group: “We are the 99%”. What it stands for is that the majority of the American populous, 99% of it, is on the back end of the economic growth ladder and is taxed unjustly comparatively to the upper echelons of society or the other 1% of society (ibid, 2011). The income inequality and distribution of wealth was the activists rallying call, since the financial

---

3 Qualitative interviews, lasting between one and two hours, were carried out with four different role players involved with the Occupy Wall Street social movement that began on September 17th, 2011 at Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan. The interviewees were recruited through the ‘snowballing’ method, and the interviews were transcribed and analyzed to provide results for the research report. The report was submitted at Södertörns Högskola University on May 25th, 2012 and is available upon written request. In order to keep the interviewees identities confidential, they are here referred to as the ‘modern’ activist and the ‘traditional’ activist.

4 Occupy will also be used as short hand during the article in place of constantly referencing the entire title of the movement: Occupy Wall Street. Occupy overall as a social movement and message should be understood as it is described here.

5 Three top economists agree 2009 worst financial crisis since great depression; risks increase if right steps are not taken. (February 29, 2009). Reuters. Retrieved 2012-03-27
collapse they had yet to see any real progress or ‘change’ occur to make their quality of life any better.

The role of social media at Occupy Wall Street was intense and it was massive, before traditional media sources even took part in reporting it. One look at the numbers below will help echo the massive amount of information and attention that Occupy Wall Street held over the two months that it actually occupied Zuccotti Park. With a total of over 46 million mentions across all social media during the tenure down at Zuccotti Occupy, and an average mark at over 750,000 for mentions daily in social media Occupy was consistently part of the online news feed of social media platforms. This volume about the social movement on social media then opens up questions for the researcher as how to understand its importance. In the following, the statements of individual activists who were using social media platforms as a tool for a movement they were directly involved in will be considered, including their use of social media for information, communication and organization, as well as in relation to traditional media.

V. Social media as an activist tool of information

To begin the analysis process of Occupy Wall Street and its relationship with social media it was important to research the ways in which role players within the social movement found out about the occupation that was initiated at Zuccotti Park on September 17th, 2011. I was not in America at the time of the initial occupation, and I was curious to research the methods in which my interviewees both on the local level and national scene were finding out about the Occupy movement. From the modern and traditional activists each individual was able to provide various opinions and experiences in their information gathering processes.

The most active and prominent role player directly involved on site at Occupy Wall Street that I interviewed was the modern activist\(^6\). His involvement is primarily with activists’ organizations in New York City as well as researching historical social movements and current progressions in the political and geo-political arenas. He spent numerous days down at Zuccotti Park speaking and interacting with fellow activists as well as sitting in on general assemblies that were held. Politically he is

---

\(^6\) What is meant by ‘modern’ activist is that he was involved directly at Occupy Wall Street, was present during many days and rallies of the social movement, and was also participating in social activism before Occupy began. He was born in the 1980’s thus making him more of a modern day activist as he was not participating much earlier than 2006.
against a lot of U.S. government policy but mostly to the extent of the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the disparity of wealth distribution and tax laws on the lower economic classes. He first learned about Occupy Wall Street early in September from blog posts that were circulating on the Internet, sites that are dedicated to political activism which he checks on a regular basis. Initially the posts he saw did not come as a major surprise because as he explained: “If you dedicate yourself to politics, world events, and social movements there are always going to be groups online and on social media sites that will be advocating movements, protest, anarchy, and a promise of something better for the future.” The fact is that much of what is talked about and prophesized never comes to fruition. This trend has really taken off over the past few years as people have become more involved with social media platforms and instead of simply being consumers of media on the Internet and watching YouTube videos or reading tweets – people are actively trying to become more involved, according to the modern activist. His interpretation was that it was this desire of becoming more involved and becoming a participant that laid the foundation in the early days of the Occupy movement, “It was a slow build up, but a strong base was established from the inception.”

The use of the internet for such radical oppositional purposes is described as a mediated activity that seeks to raise peoples’ awareness, give a voice to those who do not have one, offer social empowerment, allow disparate people and causes to organize themselves and form alliances, and ultimately be used as a tool for social change. It is the ability to from networks and build alliances at the click of a mouse that is felt to be conducive to the building of oppositional political movements that can spread across national borders and merge a variety of topics under broadly common themes, though the themes may be subject to frequent change. (Fenton 2012: 150)

It was the strong base that would raise awareness as more of the public and the media found out what was occurring. Occupy Wall Street gave that voice to those who were ready to challenge the government and its policies and generate social empowerment, and to organize and form their alliances. Social media was able to facilitate a lot of this and thus became a tool for change for the movement.

The first few days of the social movement weren’t very prophetic to the modern activist in terms of a social movement that was going to become as substantial and large as it did, he explained:
…When I started seeing the occupation that lasted a few days and then a week it became something different because people weren’t leaving and that really was the difference between […] attempts at social revolution that people have tried and something that was really going to catch attention. As I started […] keeping track of it on the main Occupy Wall Street web site7 you could see a live {video} stream on there, you could get updates via Facebook and Twitter you got a sense that this was going to be a very long term and indefinite situation the longer it went.

This is certainly where the movement started taking shape as a media event, recalling Nick Couldry’s (2009) definition: media events cross different media products and reach a wide and diverse multiplicity of audiences and participants. The live video stream, the setting up of the web site by Adbusters8, and the growth of Occupy posts on Facebook as well as Twitter with #Occupy hash tags began to grow rapidly after the initial occupation began. Similarly to what the modern activist experienced - when I asked the traditional activist9 whose experience with social movements hailed from a more traditional-media era (1990s), he recounted how he learned the initial information about what was becoming Occupy Wall Street:

I have always kept up with corporate and mainstream media because I think it is a duty for somebody who has undertaken the commitments I have, or care about the things I do […] yet I was aware that plans were being put in motion for Occupy back in August of 2011. Because along with following traditional media sources such as CNN, or the New York Times, I also check out Adbusters as well as Democracy Now10 weekly, if not daily, to keep up with what is going on within the activist community, and I look to Democracy Now for news that is not corporately backed and tends not to have a political agenda with its news coverage.

This point made was similar to that of the modern activist; these both respondents were engaged with political and social activism and therefore having knowledge about Occupy before the actual date of the encampment being set up in Zuccotti Park. Granted the traditional activist did not mention that social media was one of the tools he specifically used for finding out about Occupy Wall Street – and it is important to

7 http://occupywallst.org/
8 Adbusters media foundation "a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information age.”
http://www.adbusters.org/about/adbusters

9 The meaning behind ‘traditional activist’ is that they had experience with political activism and other social movements prior to the Web 2.0 era and the advent of social media platforms.

10 http://www.democracynow.org/ - A Daily Independent Global News Hour
note the prominence of traditional mainstream news sources, alongside the more alternative news sources here – but he did have strong opinions on its role in such a capacity:

I grew up before the technology boom. It stuns me everyday, it is an amazing thing to see the redistribution of intellectual power [...] all over the world as well as the ease with which we can now get information globally and instantly via Twitter and Facebook.

Although his two primary sources of information on Occupy weren’t social media platforms, they were both online news sources (see footnotes 9, 11), which was interesting to note in relation to the further analysis of the stance of traditional media versus social media and the coverage of social movements.

VI. Social media as the basis for communication and organization – activist perspectives on constructing alternative communication spaces

The Occupy Wall Street social movements initially based much of its ideals and tactics to that of anarchists, and it is noteworthy here that Adbusters is an anarchist publication itself. The interview with the modern activist interviewee provided insight into the organization of Occupy and its methods of communication, and shed light on how its traits were closely related to the social media tools that the activists sourced throughout the movement.

The word anarchy itself means a state of disorder, but learning further from this interviewee about anarchist movements and the way that Occupy set up their communication and organizational tactics it appeared far from disorderly. As the movement formed its base at Zuccotti Park collective decisions in the form of a general assembly and working groups focusing on basic needs became the norm of what was occurring daily and each facet was consistently being bolstered. The benefit to the Occupy movement, emphasized this activist, was that veteran protesters and anarchists know how to organize and how to keep people united. One example of this experience of community, the modern activist explained, was embodied in a soup kitchen that was set up giving out food for free, “a hallmark of anarchist gatherings, as well as the collective space and sleeping all together. It was very reflective of them but it [eventually] became more than just ‘anarchism’ down at Wall Street.” The activist however equally emphasized how the Occupy movement used its online
homepage and Facebook page to announce what was needed at the park: small items such as rain tarps and reading material, and more necessary ones such as food, water, and medical supplies. It was through social media tools that long standing communal symbols common in earlier social movements benefitted. This was a positive in terms of using the social media space to create something in a fashion that would strengthen the movement on a whole in a different form then just communication and information. It was a space that provided the necessary items that were need to sustain the social movement that ended up camping in Zuccotti park for two whole months.

Reform of dominant media often takes the form of trying to create spaces in which new voice can be seen and heard (Kidd, 2007: 238). Initially this space was created at Zuccotti Park by the groups of activists who arrived on the eve of September 17th. As the public began to hear about what was happening via their social media platforms they started to go and see it for themselves. The public was finding out about why the occupation was happening and some of the reasons this movement was taking place. It eventually lead to people from all social classes going through their own political evolution as they arrived, or as the modern activist explained further:

Whether it was at the park speaking with people or on the Internet through Facebook and Twitter […] OWS was the background of all conversation - but then they were able to really develop their own political positions a lot clearer. People who were typically A-political they knew there was something wrong with the American political system, they knew there was a lot of greed on Wall Street, […] as they got more involved speaking at Wall Street and then in their free time, {not everyone was camping} they were debating on Facebook they were reading stories. Occupy really brought the spotlight to a lot of the political philosophies that people had ignored for many years. They had been around for a long time, people have been protesting against corporate greed since Seattle in 199911 fairly extensively, but people generally disagreed with them {the activists} but the economic collapse in 200812 and beyond really made this conversation a lot more pertinent for people, and having a tool like social media allowed for their voices to be heard.

---

11 At the end of November 1999, Seattle saw major governments meet at a WTO ministerial meeting to discuss various trading rules. Seattle also saw free speech cracked down on in the name of free trade. Enormous public protests ensued. There were many differences in the perspectives of developing and industrialized nations on the current reality of free trade and how it affected them. www.globalissues.org/article/46/wto-protests-in-seattle-1999

12 2008 global financial crisis (see previous footnote)
It was this process that led to Occupy Wall Street’s rallying call in terms of their overall message and, in the eyes of the two interviewed activists, its inclusive nature of all social classes. The modern activist told of seeing mothers, college students, blue collar workers, veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, and unemployed middle class workers – the self proclaimed ‘99%’. All types and all walks of life from places far from New York City came out to show their dissatisfaction with the United States government as well as to display their solidarity in the cause. The modern activist explained the scene further:

It was an open ended social movement; you could come in and make your point, it was inclusive of everyone. Occupy unlike other political movements or activists groups wanted you to come and join them on your own terms not theirs. Members of the public, those on location, experienced what was happening - they then communicated and displayed their photos and video of their experiences via their accounts on social media, this information spread through their networks of friends, family, and colleagues.

This was the solidarity of the movement it was no longer about individual gains or what was right for one person over another. This rallying of people for the movement was bigger than the self, and that was what was truly powerful about Occupy Wall Street. As the message spread and people had their own experiences and were able to share them online in social media platforms and others heard their voices they too wanted to become a part of the movement and arrive at Zuccotti Park to see what was happening with their own eyes.

Dorothy Kidd (2007: 240) has made the point that the primary activity of alternative media activists is to construct communications spaces, which demonstrate what democratic media might look like with alternative content, modes of operation and overall philosophy. Social media platforms, it could be argued, provided a place for exactly that outside of Zuccotti Park. What Occupy was aiming to create was an open communication system where all could voice their thoughts; this did become a problem as the movement grew because there began to be opinion on top of opinion and suggestion after suggestion at the general assemblies. An initial message that grew from the outrage over corporate greed and economic inequality for the 99%; soon however there were also outcries about United States military spending and environmental polices as well.
The traditional activist continued on what not to forget about in dealing with a capitalist economy as well as a government that has never faced outright dissention or any type of armed revolution within its borders:

We still as informed citizen must be weary of what all of this meant within in the context of United States and the government, as well as its political positioning in terms of how social media was being used for communication and other purposes, because it was simply a tool. To expect major changes was grand, and as much as I hate to say it the simpler the demands of a movement the easier it will be to get the message across. At least the information is out there and there is a potential for people to get involved, I will take some participation over none any day.

John Downing (et. al.) writes (2001: 30):

…Public conversation within social movements is still shaped within the powerful impulses of capitalist economies, racialized social orders, and patriarchal cultures. Power, hegemony, and resistance are everywhere etched into and suffused within the institutions and practices of public dialogue and social movements, just as popular culture may be elitist, sexist, racist, and the rest.

As Occupy began to solidify itself as a social movement in September 2011 it became clear that social media platforms were very useful in organizing and communicating. The activists both stated that major changes could come out of the uses of social media in these terms, it leveled the playing field for activists who in the past had been caught up in the hierarchical structure of government and the public conversation that is shaped by the powerful impulses mentioned by Downing (2001). To say this is fact is not fair as we are yet to see any tangible results from the movement, but they way the activists saw social media as ‘their media’ certainly gave promise and hope behind their cause and what their abilities could be in building it up further. The modern activist exemplified this further:

Fifty years ago towns hall were more common, people would socialize more locally. Now days American society is more or less compartmentalized you […] go to work, you put your headphones on the way to work and on the subway you don’t make eye contact {speaking specifically to New York}. People are generally fragmented but as Occupy Wall Street developed we saw social media as something that could really unite us, organize us, and allow us to make contact rapidly and with ease. Even if you weren’t having a political conversation you could have a strategic conversation.
For this activist social media clearly was seen as helpful for the organization and social cohesion of the movement even within a public sphere that may becoming more fragmented with all the communicative devices and tools available. It was looked upon as something that transcended all social stratifications, accessible to the masses. The ability for activists and interested members of the public to organize and strategize was key to the early success. The modern activist continued:

It did become something that could not be ignored, not everyone shared the same opinion but the public was able to come together on the tactics behind the communication and organization for the movement that was something historically unseen before in an American social movement. Getting the amount of people Occupy did to show up in person and become part of history was groundbreaking; there was also the peaceful march in Times Square that brought out about 10,000 which was astounding in its own right. There had never been that many people there at one time just to go shopping! This was a real show of solidarity of people who were willing to go out for a cause and be seen, to say that ‘we are here, and this is real’.

Downing (et. al., 2001, p. 31) digresses: constructive social change must be built on the basis of mass activity, of self-mobilization. Effective communication within and by social movements is, therefore, a vital necessity for self-mobilization to emerge and prosper. Both communication within and by the movement courtesy of the social media platforms is now a real and tangible possibility, not to say the movement as a whole was a victory or any great change has come from it, but too look at the matters of communication within and by a movement then via the tools of social media Occupy demonstrated a great prowess and diligence in exuding the potential for such traits.

In researching the methods of communication that were bolstered by social media I questioned what communication tactics were without a tool such as social media in previous social movements in America, the traditional activist spoke on his experience:

…Were you to remove social media from the {social movement} you would instantly go back to my experience from the ‘90s. Making flyers and paying to have them printed in large quantities […] passing them out and putting them on phone polls or bulletin boards, this is how communication of a social movements message worked. As well as organizing meetings with times, dates, and locations on each flyer. Who would waste there time with that now? With social media you don’t need to do that anymore. If you remove
social media that is logically what we would go back to. You would have the hardcore activists doing things, which is what you’ve always had. Instead people are getting to communicate with social media - they can bring into the fold a much larger group of people who maybe don’t self-identify as activists and probably don’t have a history of activism.

The feelings shared here by the traditional activist certainly point to some of the communication values offered by social media tools in regards to social movement, perhaps particularly striking to those activists with historical reference points to activism before the popularization of both the Internet and social media. Clearly the benefit in the case of using social media to communicate about a social movement on a massive scale has had its benefits in making it simpler and faster and with a wider audience base, however, whether it has also led to the construction of alternative, potentially more democratic and equalizing communication spaces, is an open question. As discussed, there were statements from the activists that clearly explain how there is promise to be found in this alternative communication space of the social media platforms and to be able to sidestep corporate media in any form is a victory. Getting press and messages out has changed in this public sphere and it is only right that activists involved in something as big as the Occupy Wall Street social movement would use it to their advantage.

VII. Activist perspectives on social media in relation to traditional media

Moving on from how the public and activists gathered information, communicated, and organized using social media tools at Occupy Wall Street, what must be discussed are the perspectives of the activists on the information and stories distributed not only via social media platforms but also through traditional media. In the interviews I questioned the activists about their various opinions as role players in the Occupy movement to define their understanding of the relationship and how media sources, both traditional and social, reported on the mediatized event.

Information gathering about the social movement via social media platforms has been analyzed, as well as the informant’s interpretations on communication methods via those tools. The analysis in conjunction to the Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) theory behind why social movements need the news media¹³: validation, mobilization, and scope enlargement. Traditional media platforms will be present

¹³ From this report's perspective, news media being traditional forms of such – television, newspaper, and mainstream corporate media entities that provide information to the public.
regardless of public feelings or opinions; they are stalwarts in the industry and will continue to have their daily audiences and subscribers.

As movement protesters tend to view mainstream media not as autonomous and neutral actors but as agents and handmaidens of dominant groups whom they are challenging (ibid, 1993). I gained further perspective on this through the respondents. In specific regard to what was occurring in the context of Occupy the modern activist explained:

People are aware that traditional media, specifically television, is corporately owned in the U.S. So whether or not NBC or CBS has direct Wall Street ties to public knowledge, a lot of them do, even the NYPD have those ties {in economic terms}. There was a certain sense of a class identity within corporations. Corporations couldn’t jump on an anti-corporate agenda and give the protesters and activists of Occupy complete free reign to say whatever they needed to say, they wouldn’t give them the coverage to sensationalize it. They couldn’t be completely open to the message that Occupy Wall Street stood for because it was anti-corporate. People understood that the media was not going to be telling the truth 100% of the time so social media became our media. It became a public media it was a free open source media for the public to come in and produce their own material.

Expressed here there is clearly a suspicious stance towards the powers that be in traditional media, which are considered interlinked with the interests of large corporations who are very often large financial backers and supporters of the media entity itself. Whereas social media platforms are perceived as free an unattached to the activist and as thus more open to alternative views and opinions without having any boundaries that are present within the traditional media platforms such as newspaper, radio, and television. An interesting discussion in terms of the understanding of media ownership which I will expand upon, it is an important facet describing the growing relationship of traditional media and social media within the context of social movement to know that traditional media in such a context as Occupy Wall Street found itself in an interesting predicament trying to figure out how to report on a social movement that was against much of the corporate deception that financed their very institution.

---

14 NBC and CBS are two of the biggest television corporations in the United States and are available in every state via affiliates in all the markets.
As has been pointed out by several commentators, fewer and fewer corporations control more and more of the U.S. news media (Bagdikian, 1997, cited in Curran & Gurevitch, 2005: 176) and major media conglomerates control more and more of the world’s media. Where corporations do not control media, they are generally voices of the state (Curran & Gurevitch, 2005: 176). This speaks to the fact and understanding that you would not find traditional media and the press wanting to pick up or even support Occupy Wall Street the traditional activist touted:

When I was out doing activist work there was a profound difference between what was happening on the ground in reality versus what the corporate and traditional media covered. How they chose to present the story was often changing the context – they had an adversarial relationship with these causes. So they maligned them and discolored them actively. You could certainly still see that in regards to Occupy, they just can’t dismiss something as big. A lot of more brilliant initiatives undertaken by the activists were still ignored once the mainstream media came into the fold, but it was a lot better than it would have been 10 years prior.

Occupy which speaks out against the government’s economic policies as well as the role that corporate greed has been playing in American society for an extremely long time and came to a head in 2008 when the big banks such as AIG and JP Morgan where found to have been participating in illegal operations as well as outright lying to their own clients is material that is a very sensitive area for traditional media to report on. The amount of people that were behind Occupy Wall Street or were even actually there in New York is still such a minute scale in terms of the overall populous of the United States that coverage was still directed at a large part of the country that was not in agreement with what was happening regardless of what they stood for.

Curran and Gurevitch (2005: 177) further expand the theory:

A strictly economic explanation of news is very appealing to journalists themselves. In fact, it is in many respects as obvious to working journalists as to critical scholars, that pleasing Wall Street investors rather than serving conscience is increasingly the task of publishers, that editors more than ever are seeking news that will sell…

To further analyze the point one would wonder then why in this scenario would activists still look to traditional media for answers on a movement such as this, if they were going to be one sided, this is where I found a generational gap where the insight
of the traditional activist I interviewed shed light on possible generational differences with regards to attitudes towards traditional and social media. The traditional activist who spent much of the 1990’s and 2000’s fighting against the second American invasion of Iraq as well as American foreign policy in the Palestine-Israel conflict, described his views on why traditional media remains a powerful media entity:

You can’t dismiss the remaining and continuing strength of the mainstream traditional media, most people not much older than myself {he is 36}, my parents and people from their age bracket and above are still very much plugged into traditional media as their primary and maybe only news source. They are not going to stop following traditional media because social media has become what it is, they don’t know how to use it anyway. You cannot underestimate how powerful corporate media still is, but now you do have a way to sidestep them to some extent with social media platforms. When we see the exponential growth of Internet and technology it is hard for me to imagine that it will be a lot different 10-20 years from now - you will really have probing legitimate new sources as part of American life. Seeds have been planted and they are starting to sprout up which is huge, it is not an immediate victory but it is a huge change within our society. I don’t think people our age 20 years from now will be tuning into CNN, BBC etc. as the older generations are now.

This is a salient point and certainly will lead to further research opportunities when the Web 2.0 generation has gone through further time in sourcing the majority of their news and information primarily off of their social media platforms. The generational difference in media use, specifically in relation to social movements, is that traditional media used to be the primary source for news stories before the advent of the Internet. Activists attempted to get their story either on television news broadcast or be covered by a popular publication if possible – whether it was a headline in a newspaper or an article in a magazine. In an example of what occurred during the last period of major social unrest in America, the modern activist shared the following explanation:

In the 1960s during {protests against Vietnam War} and Civil Rights marches, there was a lot of organizing in the streets but there was also something in the message that united people. They didn’t need to be on the Internet for hours everyday, they just knew they needed to be somewhere and do something and eventually it could not be overlooked by the media…it was ‘news worthy’. Occupy had that too, the message of greed and corruption in the government was what resonated with people – yet the Occupy activists didn’t only have the traditional media as news producers.
It is a strong and valuable point made here because there is certainly a positive light shed on the potentials of social media within modern day movements. Ignoring the fact that social movements have occurred in history, not only in America but also globally, before the technological media boom that our public sphere is immersed in 2012 would be a mistake. Putting people in the streets and making a united stand is certainly no different now than it was in 1960, the same actions need to happen. The action of going out in public and making a statement, the major difference separating earlier social movements is that no longer are the police or media able to be sole controllers of public action or coverage of the activists messages as they once had been. Social media, wireless Internet connections and mobile technology have now brought real time un-edited reporting to the front lines of all movements.

VIII. Conclusion

This article has attempted to discuss the relationship between modern social movements and social media tools, on the basis of insights drawn from interviews with two individual activists. This discussion can be related to an ongoing debate on the potentials and limitations of social media to the wider public sphere. The ability to raise awareness about issues and stories as well as give a voice to people who before may have struggled to be heard now have a place, have led to arguments of social media platforms as creating different forms of social empowerment and new communicative spaces in many societies, providing ways to organize as well as form alliances with one another. Yet, counter-argument have, among other things, emphasized the speculative nature of some of these predictions, as well as limitations in terms of the nature of the public discourse that social media give rise to.

The activists discussed in this article were however overwhelmingly positive in their understanding of social media, and explained how they used online new sources as well as social media platforms for their information and understanding about the Occupy Wall Street movement, and also how they considered this information as a valuable complement to traditional media. Traditional media were in some instances considered in opposition to social media, which the activist instead described as ‘our’ media. Some critical statements concerned that there might have been too much information or too many demands in the end for Occupy Wall Street to become any sort of revolution, but overall social media were perceived as having
great potential for their activist engagements, and with potential to underline themes of solidarity.

Whether or not such understandings mean that social media actually point to an ‘escape’ from traditional media or has potential to be used to implement change, there is certainly a possibility to share ideas and information through an alternative channel. Communication has become tangible and possible not only within and about a social movement but by it as well; in the way we interact with movements as well as receive live, raw, and unedited coverage. Here, further research into its uses by activists may be able to provide a fuller understanding of its role within social movements and within society at large.
References:


Carroll, W., Hackett, R. Democratic media activism through the lens of social movement theory. Media, Culture, & Society, 28 (1), pp. 83-104


Couldry, N. 2009. Does the “media” have a future? European Journal of Communication 24 (4) pp. 437-450


