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Publisher: Routledge
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office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest

Publication details, including instructions for authors and
subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csms20>

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Sarah Gaby^a & Neal Caren^a

^a Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina, Chapel
Hill, NC, USA

Version of record first published: 30 Jul 2012

To cite this article: Sarah Gaby & Neal Caren (2012): Occupy Online: How Cute Old Men and
Malcolm X Recruited 400,000 US Users to OWS on Facebook, Social Movement Studies: Journal of
Social, Cultural and Political Protest, DOI:10.1080/14742837.2012.708858

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2012.708858>



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Occupy Online: How Cute Old Men and Malcolm X Recruited 400,000 US Users to OWS on Facebook

SARAH GABY & NEAL CAREN

Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

ABSTRACT *What attracted so many supporters of the Occupy Wall Street movement to the movement's Facebook pages? Using a database of 1500 Facebook Occupy group pages, we analyze the types of posts that recruit new users. In the case of the Occupy movement, the success of recruiting over 400,000 users to Facebook was driven by user-created content produced in a medium that encourages contributions and sharing to an existing set of dense networks of potential movement sympathizers. We find that the posts that are most successful at recruiting active Facebook engagement utilize existing forms of communication, such as sharing pictures and status updates. We also find that posts that use confrontational messages and messages about solidarity appear most often in the top posts. Our findings suggest that online social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter provide a powerful tool for movements to rapidly spread information and reach broad audiences. In addition, we offer some analysis of the impact of these findings for social movements that hope to utilize Facebook.*

KEY WORDS: Occupy movement, social movements, movement recruitment, images, Facebook, information and communications technology

Since Occupy Wall Street (OWS) began in New York City on 17 September 2011, the movement has spread offline to thousands of locations around the globe. Social networking sites have been critical for linking potential supporters in order to share information and stories. More than 1500 unique Facebook pages were established to spread the movement including pages focused on the Wall Street Occupation, local occupations across the globe, occupying specific institutions and networking occupiers. Through common Facebook activities such as sharing pictures, videos and status updates (Pempek *et al.*, 2008), Facebook pages provide a familiar medium for engaging in the movement. The movement's Facebook presence therefore consists of Occupy's political message filtered through the social network's style of interacting. While corporate control of the communication network is not without drawbacks, this relatively seamless extension of a primarily non-political communication platform allows the movement to

Correspondence Address: Sarah Gaby, Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina, 155 Hamilton Hall CB#3210, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3210, USA. Email: sgaby@unc.edu

1474-2837 Print/1474-2829 Online/12/000001-8 © 2012 Taylor & Francis
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2012.708858>

engage with an incredibly large audience without the filter of the mass media and without having to develop a new media infrastructure.

In order to explore how activists, sympathizers and others interact on Occupy-related Facebook pages, we examine the top 100 posts in terms of drawing in new users. We find that the most popular posts utilize familiar Facebook activities. Major uses for Facebook within the movement include the recruitment of people and resources to local occupations; information sharing and storytelling and across-group exchanges. Among the top pages are quotes from elites interpreted as support for the Occupy movement and narratives by unlikely adherents, indicating the capacity for storytelling to convey messages of surprising alliances (Polletta, 2006). Our research demonstrates how activists and their sympathizers adapt existing technologies and ways of using those technologies for political purposes.

Social Movements Online

Prior research on social movements online has focused on cyberactivism in the form of electronic campaigns, e-movements and the distribution of brochureware (Daniels, 2009; Earl *et al.*, 2010). Generally, online activities are broadening the repertoires of social movements (Karpf, 2010). A number of scholars have been attentive to the capacity for online activism to generate offline activism (Raynes-Goldie & Walker, 2008; Earl *et al.*, 2010), but in few cases do the online tools studied directly relate to an offline social movement. Instead, these studies look at the general influence of online participation in influencing offline collective action (Raynes-Goldie & Walker, 2008). Still, other past research has focused on alternative frames for online activism that extend beyond the dissemination of information, and instead address the establishment of collective identity through online interaction (Flanagin *et al.*, 2006) or the formation of social movement online communities (Caren *et al.*, 2012). Past research indicated that online social movement websites generally have low levels of interaction and very little dialog (Stein, 2009).

Occupy Offline and Online

The Occupy movement was inspired by Arab Spring and the Spanish *Indignados* movement, which involved tens of thousands of individuals camped out in cities like Madrid, calling for increased democracy and employment through assemblies organized around consensus principles. The Occupy movement formally began on 13 July 2011 when Adbusters, a Canadian not-for-profit magazine, asked, 'Are you ready for a Tahrir moment? On 17 September, flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street'.¹ This call was echoed by a diverse group of pre-existing entities, ranging from the hacktivist collective Anonymous to the community labor coalition New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts, who organized a meeting on 2 August at which the general assembly (GA) format was established (Chafkin, 2012). On 8 August, more than a month before the planned Occupation, the first Facebook page for OWS was established. The initial posts on the Facebook page called supporters to a GA, a tactical form of participatory democracy that would become one of the signature elements of local Occupations. On 17 September, hundreds gathered in lower Manhattan, initiating a movement that would grow and spread, leading to the establishment of many

local Occupy groups and encampments with a number of strategies that drew national attention.

OWS thus far has primarily been an off-line activity involving activists gathering in central city locations for hours, days or even months on end. Notwithstanding, OWS has been an active presence on major social media platforms using sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Meetup, Livestream and individual websites. Our analysis suggests that Facebook is among the most prominent social networking sites associated with the movement. For instance, during the rise in movement membership in October, <http://occupytogether.org> had 13,868 ‘occupiers’, while the Facebook page for Occupy Boston had 28,020 likes alone. The number of followers on Facebook also far outnumber that on Twitter and Meetup, with only 17,760 Twitter followers subscribed to the Occupy Boston Twitter feed, and five Meetup members. Many movement groups also have websites such as <http://occupyboston.com>.

Facebook Activism

Past research on the utilization of Facebook as a social networking tool shows that people use Facebook first and foremost for communicating with friends, and then for sharing pictures, often doing so in Facebook’s public space as opposed to through private messaging (Pempek *et al.*, 2008). In addition, while students in Pempek *et al.*’s study on average joined about 25 groups, the majority reported never using groups to discuss serious topics or to express opinions or connect with other group members. The Facebook infrastructure is geared toward this sort of apolitical behavior: sharing news about your life and pictures of cute cats (Zuckerman, 2008). Yet, as first noted by Zuckerman (2008), this dense network for information sharing provides ‘a wealth of tech that’s extremely helpful to activists’.

While the Occupy movement developed its own movement infrastructure centered on local GAs, communication between activists, supporters, sympathizers and the curious could take place on a medium on which many already spent hours a day—Facebook. With the ease of showing support for Rihanna or the Hunger Games that regularly takes place online, individuals could express support in the same medium for the Occupy movement by clicking ‘Like’. Occupy and other activist and movement groups that have utilized similar approaches to organizing through Facebook have been able to expand rapidly, due to the reduced cost of participation. Since the activity takes place on Facebook, we would expect that the form it takes would mimic the form of nonpolitical Facebook activities, such as sharing pictures or status updates, despite the change in topic. Whether this limited form of online participation turns into offline activism remains an open question (e.g. Gladwell, 2010; Shirkey, 2011) and is beyond the scope of this Profile, but given the magnitude of online participation—with over four hundred thousand individuals active on Occupy pages—Facebook activism constitutes an important component of the Occupy movement.

Occupying Facebook

Media accounts have emphasized the role of Facebook in the Occupy movement,² and a survey of visitors to <http://occupywallstreet.org> found that Facebook was the social networking site most used by protesters.³ In order to explore the extent and type of

Occupy group usage on Facebook, we created a list of all Facebook pages related to the movement. Using published lists⁴ and Facebook searches for key terms, we identified 398 pages on US Occupations. There are likely to be smaller pages that we did not account for.⁵ We found that the density of Facebook activism was highest in college towns and in state capitals.

Only data from public Occupy pages were used in this study. The majority of Facebook activity happens on personal pages, and we were not able to observe this information because of privacy restrictions. For example, if an individual posted a status update that he/she was attending an Occupy Durham event, we would not be able to capture that activity. If he/she posted this on the Occupy Durham page, however, we would have collected the information. Thus, the estimates that we provide here underestimate the extent to which Facebook users have been engaged with OWS.

For each page, we used Facebook's developer application programming interface (API) to download all posts and comments on the page between the day the page was created and 17 October 2011, covering the first month of the Occupation. From this we are able to identify the number of likes for each post along with text, content and author of each post and post comment as well as the date of a user's first and subsequent posts. Through this means, we were able to identify the posts that drew in the most new users (for a fuller discussion of the data and methods, see Caren & Gaby, 2011).

In order to better understand the types of posts that recruited members, we analyzed the top 100 posts on Facebook that drew in new users, the majority of which were posted by the OWS Facebook group. We found that we could categorize 93 of these 100 posts in six general categories: confrontational posts (35 occurrences), posts representing elite support for the movement (9), informal polling of movement members (3), personal narratives (7), media inaccuracies (3) and solidarity (43). Personal narratives that engaged new users were often expressed by individuals who were unlikely movement adherents such as children and the elderly. The remaining uncategorized posts were focused on popular culture, specific movement incidences such as the search for a missing occupier and the sale of a movement photograph. We also overwhelmingly found that pictures were the type of post that drew the most new user hits (47 occurrences), followed by announcements in the form of status updates (30), videos (16), informal polls (5) and news stories (2).

Building a Following

The post that drew in the most new users was a picture with two versions of a *New York Times* story posted 20 min apart.⁶ On one side the caption below a photograph of police arresting demonstrators reads: 'After allowing them onto the bridge, the police cut off and arrested dozens of Occupy Wall Street demonstrators'. The same picture on the revised version reads, 'In a tense showdown over the East River, police arrested hundreds of Occupy Wall Street demonstrators after they marched onto the bridge's Brooklyn-bound roadway'. Across the two articles written in bright pink letters reads 'it only takes 20 minutes to shift the blame'.⁷ We found that this picture appeared three times in the top 100 posts, posted by two individual users to Occupy pages and by a third Occupy group. In total, the post drew in 1125 new users. The reoccurrence of a post in the top 100 indicates the importance of the particular post in recruitment.

Additional posts that occurred more than once include two appearances of a video depicting individuals being arrested inside a Citi bank allegedly attempting to close their

accounts, and drew in 242 new users. This was a confrontational post as the video shows police dealing aggressively with protesters who are chanting and shouting at them. There were also two appearances of a video showing an Occupy march in Madrid, which combined drew 205 new users, and two occurrences of a picture with a Malcolm X quote about oppression which drew 554 users combined. An additional double occurrence was of a video in which a Marine takes on 30 cops in a 'Wallstreet Faceoff'.⁸ The post drew 265 total new users.

The majority of the posts that drew in new movement participants occurred early on in the timeline, as expected. There were nine posts that occurred prior to 1 October 2011, the 15th formal day of the movement. Three of these posts were references to elites (Malcolm X twice and Thomas Jefferson), three were calls to solidarity (e.g. 'Over 5000 people are here now! We are overflowing into the streets. How many tomorrow?'),⁹ and four were confrontational (e.g. a photo of a police officer pointing a gun at a photographer that reads, 'Photography, it's not a crime').¹⁰ The majority of posts that occurred as the movement grew throughout October were less focused on elite support and shifted to posts about solidarity, personal narratives and confrontational posts. Posts that were categorized as announcements also increased as the movement progressed, although posts of pictures remained the most prominent throughout the data-set.

Personal narratives were incorporated into the language of the movement, often ending in the line 'I am the 99 percent'. These narratives of involvement or the retelling of movement-related experiences were found often in the top 100 posts. Stories were generally targeted to the local group but may have a more general reach. Personal narratives were complemented by the retelling of experiences of other Occupy groups, sometimes through digital outlets such as YouTube videos. Commonly posted content dealt with cases of violence at Occupy sites, such as the 5 October 2011 OWS violence. Other reactions focused on combating misconceptions about the group. For instance, the most liked post on any Occupy Facebook page, with 22,132 likes (the third most popular post for drawing in new users at 746), was a photo of an elderly man holding a typed piece of paper that reads:

As a young man I served honorably in the Navy. [...] Now I am retired. [...] I live in an apartment with my working daughter and grandson. My retirement doesn't always cover all of my share of the monthly bills.

[...]

And I am sick of providing welfare to multinationals and being forced to pay for insurance that doesn't insure, food that doesn't nourish and taxes that support arms, oil and drug cartels. I am sick of politicians [sic] loyal to Wall Street.

I am part of the 99%.¹¹

The picture, originally posted to the <http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/> page on 6 October, was shared by 10,114 people and commented on by 2223 people after it was posted to the Occupy New Brunswick wall on 8 October.

Discussion

In this profile, we focus on the way that activists co-opt existing social media tools intended for sharing pictures of cute cats (Zuckerman, 2008) for political purposes. We find that the majority of posts that draw in new users fit into six content categories: confrontational posts, posts representing elite support for the movement, informal polling of movement members, personal narratives, media inaccuracies and solidarity, in five styles of posting: pictures, announcements in the form of status updates, videos, informal polls and news stories. Our findings support the theory that activists and supporters utilize tools they know in collective action. Like other social networking sites, such as Twitter, Facebook allows movement sympathizers to be involved in new political networks without requiring movements to develop a separate communication infrastructure.

Additionally, these findings point to the power of images in gaining movement support. In roughly 60% of the top 100 posts that drew in new users, pictures and video were the medium for these messages. Although social movement scholars have offered some interpretations of the use of images for shock value (Jasper, 1997) or to carry political messages (Szasz, 1999) or by media and other countermovement groups to portray a movement (Laraña *et al.*, 1994; McAdam *et al.*, 1996), far less attention has been paid to the role of images in the recruitment of movement adherents (Halfmann & Young, 2010). While some of these photos, such as a graphic photo of a female protestor who was shot with a rubber bullet,¹² have the appeal of the grotesque employed by movements such as the antislavery and antiabortion movements (Halfmann and Young), we observed a variety of emotional, logical and moral appeals associated with various images. With sites like Facebook that readily allow researchers to see the tools of movements, future studies should continue to address the power of images in movement recruitment.

Despite the success of certain types of images and posts, there is no simple recipe for movements that hope to exploit the power of Facebook to reach those not already deeply embedded in political networks. Few of the top posts relied entirely on centrally produced content. We found no evidence that the top images were produced by OWS or local Occupations for the purpose of going viral. Instead, the list of top posts is dominated by user-created content. Those posts that resonated with different audiences became popular through online sharing, while thousands of posts with little appeal were simply passed over. While movement framing processes are often contested, this process may further reduce the power of movements to shape their own frames. However, the combination of a large, dense network of potential sympathizers and a medium that encourages contributions and sharing makes dominant social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, unique and powerful resources for movements.

Notes

1. *Adbusters*. 2011. '#OCCUPYWALLSTREET A shift in revolutionary tactics'. <http://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html>.
2. <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/10/egypt-occupy-wall-street/>.
3. <http://www.fastcompany.com/1789018/occupy-wall-street-demographics-statistics>.

4. <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/10/04/1022722/-Occupy-Wall-Street:-List-and-map-of-over-200-US-solidarity-events-and-Facebook%C2%A0pages>; <http://www.collectivedisorder.com/occupytogether/latest>.
5. Please contact the first author if you know of any pages that we overlooked
6. Top images available at <http://imgur.com/a/CrwmA#0>.
7. <https://www.facebook.com/184749301592842/posts/286107748083800>.
8. <https://www.facebook.com/153774071379194/posts/295464300464118>.
9. <https://www.facebook.com/184749301592842/posts/209094492491656>.
10. <https://www.facebook.com/153774071379194/posts/10150307153440248>.
11. <https://www.facebook.com/129365397165056/posts/133249930109936>.
12. <https://www.facebook.com/138981536200235/posts/151473594951029>.

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Sarah Gaby is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is interested in social movements, political sociology and organizations, particularly as they relate to youth civic engagement.

Neal Caren is an assistant professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His research interests center on the quantitative and qualitative comparative analysis of protest and social movements.