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The 21st Century Activist's Dilemma: Social Media's Impact on the Occupy and Tea Party Movements

Alexander Elliott Carter-Parks
Bard College

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The 21st Century Activist's Dilemma:
Social Media's Impact on the Occupy and Tea Party Movements

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Alexander Elliott Carter-Parks

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1: Definitions, Methodology, and Case Studies.....	7
Chapter 2: The Tea Party and Occupy Movements.....	23
Chapter 3: Analysis.....	45
Conclusion: Looking Ahead, Discursive Movements.....	57
Bibliography.....	60

Abstract: This paper examines the influence of social media on political participation in American social movements, focusing on the cases of the Occupy and Tea Party movements during their heyday in the period from 2009 to 2012 as a framework for analysis. Users of these social networks have access to instantaneous information dissemination, broad new political networks, and a wealth of radical thought; but also can be diverted from real-world participation by the appeal of low-cost online activism. Using a foundation of strong-tie/weak-tie activism theory, demographics surveys, and media coverage this paper argues that social media has reshaped the process by which certain privileged demographic subgroups are drawn to participate in political social movements, and thereby suggests possible preconditions to convert social media activism into real-world participation.

Introduction

Digital social media was not created to intrinsically be a tool of politics, but through evolutions of usage patterns and technology has come to hold a prominent place in the realm of contemporary political tools. Precisely how and in what ways social media functions politically is a set of questions that are under intense debate by scholars in sociology, media theory, political studies, and other fields. Positions on the role of social media tend to be polarizing, and discussion frequently gravitates toward extremes.

Social media is often lauded by its supporters as being a medium which goes beyond civic participation and engenders real political participation in a way unmatched by prior technologies. Authors such as Lance Bennett suggest that “many of the spontaneous and creative forms of online collaboration seem more appealing than the options typically offered in youth engagement sites sponsored by governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in efforts to invigorate public life for young people”¹ which can lead to users of social media becoming better informed, finding common causes, and participating more in politics. Detractors of social media argue that political activity on its platforms have almost no real-world impact, and frequently weaken participation in politics outside of the digital sphere. In their view social media functions primarily as a placebo that causes its users to attach the same

¹ Bennett, Lance W. "Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age."

participatory value to sharing a political video on Facebook as to joining a public rally or attending a town hall meeting. The same medium that can readily generate so much interest in politics can also diffuse real support for political action.

This argument leads to the critical dilemma I seek to address in this research: if social media can both create and paralyze political movements, how should modern activists choose to approach and integrate it? The context through which I examine this issue is political participation in movements, and the effect social media has on both the process of creating new participants, as well as on the act of participation itself. In doing so, there are three underlying questions I seek to address in this research:

First, did social media change the way in which people participate in these movements, or did it affect how they were able to organize – in other words, was the real change to the nature of participation, or to the logistics of participation? If the answer leans more toward the former, it lends weight to the argument that social media is a radically new form of emergent political participation, rather than an evolution of existent formats. In contrast, if the answer is that it was a logistical evolution rather than a change to the nature of participation, it adds to the idea that social media does have a real impact on political participation in some way, even if it is not a radically new one. Either way, this analysis makes the argument that social media does indeed have a real impact on political participation, whether it be conceptual or logistical.

Second, does social media change the nature of political networks themselves, and as a result how does social media control translate into real political power? On the tail of the first question, this seeks to address the nature of the change to political networks caused by social media. If the nature of networks is fundamentally altered by social media, there is the potential to make a strong argument that the nature of political participation is affected in turn. Looking at the exchange of social media power into real political power, such as the conventional political

influence of these social media-driven movements and the demographics of who was drawn to these movements, provides a means of looking at the real impact of some of the theoretical assertions made in this analysis.

Third, and most generally, does this new form of information dissemination and communication, if it is indeed truly new, create new forms of movement and political institutions that are potent, replicable, and sustainable? Critics of social media activism frequently argue that it seems new simply because it is recent; or that it is no different from prior forms of engagement, but seems otherwise because it is on a new platform of communications technology. A distinction within this question is also whether social media creates a new form of movement and institution, or whether it alters interactions with existent versions thereof. This question also seeks to provide an explanation of possible preconditions that would lead social media activism to convert into real-world participation.

Though answering these questions cannot comprehensively describe the impact of social media on political participation, doing so can still provide a clear framework for understanding many of the ambiguities surrounding arguments of social media activism: why certain movements and groups are drawn toward it and others are not, why online participation sometimes leads to an outpouring of real-world support and other times seems to prevent it, and what the benefit of social media is to political movements over dominant communications technologies of the past.

Chapter 1: Definitions, Methodology, and Case Studies

Answering questions pertaining to social media's impact on political participation in a general form misses more important points about the nature of contemporary political movements and the ways in which they overlap and intersect with social media. And differentiating between what is political and apolitical is itself challenging, and opinions cut both ways on whether social media is a political instrument, or a social instrument used also for politics. Clay Shirky suggests that “tools specifically designed for dissident use are politically easy for the state to shut down, whereas tools in broad use become much harder to censor without risking politicizing the larger group of otherwise apolitical actors”² which in the case of social media includes a very large base of actors who are apolitical by default.

The ubiquitous nature of social media presents challenges in defining exactly what it is, and isn't. A Pew Internet Research study found that 66% of all social media users, or 39% of all American adults, have engaged in at least one of eight political activities with social media.³ This is an impressively large figure, but also demonstrates that only just over half of social media users engage with the platform on a political level. Therefore treating the entire platform as a political medium would likely ostracize and politicize a wide group of actors who would not necessarily be inclined to participate politically through social media otherwise. According to Shirky, Ethan Zuckerman of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society dubbed this "the cute cat theory of digital activism"⁴ which states that “specific tools designed to defeat state

² Gladwell, Malcolm, and Clay Shirky. "From Innovation to Revolution."

³ Rainie, Lee et al. "Social Media and Political Engagement."

⁴ Gladwell and Shirky, "From Innovation to Revolution"

censorship (such as proxy servers) can be shut down with little political penalty, but broader tools that the larger population uses to, say, share pictures of cute cats are harder to shut down.”⁵ For the purposes of this research, it is fair to say that social media is a platform which has great potential to be used as a political tool, but is not inherently created for the explicit use of political action.

Selecting Cases

Examining the impact of social media on more specific aspects of participation can lend enough specificity to derive useful and generalizable conclusions. This examination could take place in the form of a theoretical dissertation, but doing so would result in an argument lacking a great deal of context; much of the debate surrounding social media as a political tool is founded on the events of particular movements rather than broad theorizing. Conducting a large-n statistical analysis, such as of social media users generally, again would fall short of the intended goal; without considering the political events that guided users toward or away from participation, there would be insufficient context to draw pertinent conclusions. Focusing on a single case study would be enlightening insofar as the details of that case are concerned, but similarly lacking in context beyond the events of that specific moment in time, and it would be difficult to extrapolate general conclusions from a single outcome. For this research I have chosen a comparative case study, because it provides a historical basis for examining the topic of political social media, as well as the context of more than one outcome. With both these features as the analytical groundwork, a comparative case study is more suited to drawing theoretical conclusions from existent sources.

⁵ Ibid.

There are many possible cases in recent history that have been shaped by the influence of social media. Perhaps the most famous example of recent political history is the Arab Spring – political uprisings across Middle Eastern and North African countries including Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and others, that were prominently shaped by social media. Populist political movements are a long-standing form of political participation that are often formed and influenced by the nature of the social networks from which their constituent members emerge. Given the strong effect of social media on individual social networks, social media since its inception has had a particularly strong effect on populist social movements. It is a natural progression therefore to examine the impact of social media on recent populist political movements.

In choosing cases to compare, I wanted to minimize the number of other variables as much as possible, so I narrowed my search to cases that occurred at approximately the same time in the evolution of social media (particularly because the technology is changing so rapidly); that occurred in approximately the same political environment; and that were recent enough to still reflect on the current state of political social media without being ongoing and still developing stories. These parameters led me to choose cases within the United States that experienced their main importance and vitality within the last five or so years.

Since the advent of social media, two such populist political movements have reached the national stage in the United States, in part by utilizing social media: the Occupy movement, and the Tea Party movement. While other movements have done so as well, these two share a similar enough political space that they are useful for comparison. Both the Tea Party and Occupy inhabit a space somewhere between civil society actors and political party actors, which is a key

juncture for social media to function as a political tool. Interestingly, the two movements feature sharply contrasting ideological points, despite sharing a number of media-related core organizational tools and structures. Furthermore, each movement achieved or attempted different modifications to the political structure of the United States. The Tea Party movement was more successful in placing political candidates in actual elected offices than was the Occupy movement. The Occupy movement in the United States attempted to effect change on a level mostly outside of the existent electoral system at play, and instead challenge the direction of normative discussion.

Both movements are manifestations of the generation first becoming involved with mass social media, but in ways that are distinct to each case and yet still inform the same societal phenomenon. Both movements emerged primarily in the United States, in large part as a reaction to political conditions endemic to the political structure of the United States. The two cases are therefore more comparable than a selection of international cases may be, such as contrasting the international presence of Occupy with the American presence of the Tea Party. While they are not directly equivalent movements in all measurable capacities, very few significant contemporaneous political movements are, and these two cases share a strong foundation for analytical purposes. Examining these two cases in the context of their use of social media, and the resulting effect on their social networks and organizations can hopefully address a number of questions that are pertinent to the field of political social media thought beyond the historical relevance of these cases alone. The American political system often appears impervious to change from forces outside of its well-established and controlled endemic structures. Proponents of social media as a political tool suggest that it can provide new options

for insurgent groups seeking to subvert a regulated existent political sphere. This particular analysis attempts to address the relationship of social media to political participation in new American populist movements, using the cases of the Occupy and Tea Party movements as empirical evidence woven into the arguments about the topic on theoretical grounds.

Source Methodology

The sources used for this research primarily fall into three categories: academic papers, demographics studies, and media coverage and commentary on these movements and the nature of social media collected from the Internet. Choosing the balance of source-type among these categories is partly a result of the information that is available on these recent movements and social media, which is often distributed through channels outside of conventional academic journals. It is also partly a choice to reflect the decentralized and diverse nature of the movements and mediums discussed in this paper; a core component of social media and social media-driven movements is their ability to spread across a largely horizontal hierarchical structure and be influenced by a wide variety of participants.

Defining Social Media

Defining what constitutes social media is a formidable task in and of itself. According to the authors Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, the historical roots of social media reach back to 1998 when Bruce and Susan Abelson founded Open Diary, which was “an early social networking site that brought together online diary writers into one community”⁶ and led to the

⁶ Kaplan, Andreas M., Michael Haenlein. “Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media”

term “blog” being coined to describe the community. MySpace (founded in 2003) and Facebook (founded in 2004) led to the popularization of the platform, and widespread use of the term “social media.” The contemporary major players, Facebook and Twitter in particular, dominate the field in terms of political discussions. A Pew Internet Project study estimates that 71% of online adults use Facebook as of November 2013, and 19% use Twitter as of January 2014.⁷ Of those groups, 66% of all social media users, or 39% of all American adults, have engaged in at least one of eight political activities with social media, according to another Pew study.⁸

Although it is useful to examine the specific entities present in social media, doing so still leaves open the broader definition of social media itself. One article published by the Finnish research group Suomen Toivo defines social media as “new information network and information technology using a form of communication utilising interactive and user-produced content, and interpersonal relationships are created and maintained. Typical social media network services could be content sharing, web communities, and Internet forums.”⁹ From this definition, they identify eight key components of social media that distinguishes it from prior technologies, which are the selective identity of its users; the diversity of available information; the omnipresence of information collection; the speed of information dissemination; the lack of uniform hierarchy in digital space; the shift in user preference from objectivity to subjectivity; the ability to combine forms of recorded information in new ways; and the general absence of traditional forms of regulation.¹⁰

The Suomen Toivo definition is broadly useful, and implies another feature of social media that is perhaps a common-sense definition: social media is a digital phenomenon, and

⁷ Pew Internet Research, "Social Networking Fact Sheet."

⁸ Rainie et al., “Social Media and Political Engagement”

⁹ Auvinen, Ari-Matti. "Social Media - The New Power of Political Influence." 7

¹⁰ Ibid., 6

operates through the Internet. This is one of the firmest differentiating points between social media and prior forms of civic and political engagement or communication technologies. It is inherently tied to the evolution of technology pertaining to the Internet, which itself is based on connectivity between its users. Social media differs from types of media such as television and radio because there is a common element of participation and collaboration between users that is absent or at least uncommon in those pre-digital mediums. In its current iteration social media is dependent on the existence of several technologies that together are called “Web 2.0” that Kaplan and Haenlein designate as:

Adobe Flash (a popular method for adding animation, interactivity, and audio/video streams to web pages), RSS (Really Simple Syndication, a family of web feed formats used to publish frequently updated content, such as blog entries or news headlines, in a standardized format), and AJAX (Asynchronous Java Script, a technique to retrieve data from web servers asynchronously, allowing the update of web content without interfering with the display and behavior of the whole page).¹¹

The widespread presence of Web 2.0 technologies on the Internet allows social media platforms to be ubiquitous and gather large networks of users. Beyond this general definition of scope, Kaplan and Haenlein provide a rubric for differentiating types of social media into subcategories based on a set of theories from “the field of media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure)”¹² as the two core elements of social media. Social presence theory states that “media differ in the degree of ‘social presence’—defined as the acoustic, visual, and physical contact that can be achieved—they allow to emerge between two communication partners.”¹³ In turn, social presence is affected by the intimacy and immediacy of the medium, which then differentiates a low-presence telephone conversation from a high-presence face-to-face discussion; as well as asynchronous communication such as email

¹¹ Kaplan and Haenlein, “Users of the world unite!”

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

from synchronous communication such as an online live chat. Higher social presence interactions have a greater social influence on the behavior of each communication partner.

The concept of media richness is tightly linked to social presence. Kaplan and Haenlein write that “media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) is based on the assumption that the goal of any communication is the resolution of ambiguity and the reduction of uncertainty.”¹⁴ In this theory, the mode of differentiation among media is the “amount of information they allow to be transmitted in a given time interval,”¹⁵ also known as the richness of that media. Consequently, some forms of media are more effective modes of ambiguity and uncertainty resolution than others. Given this classification, each platform of social media can be differentiated by its types of social presence interactions, and by the richness of its media. This in turn makes social media, particularly network-based social media such as Facebook and Twitter, a useful phenomenon to examine in terms of its impact on political participation and network mobilization.

From these sources, the definition of social media for the purposes of this research is the collection of Internet platforms that utilize Web 2.0 technologies to create communities that are connected by a substantial degree of social presence and media richness in their interactions through the medium.

Political Participation and Political Movements

A first important distinction is between the term civic participation and the term political participation. Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela define the difference as “civic participation involves behavior aimed at resolving problems of the community (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina,

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Jenkins, & Delli-Carpini, 2006), whereas political participation—both offline and online—refers to behavior seeking to influence government action and policymaking (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).”¹⁶ This goal can be addressed through a variety of subtle and indirect ways and therefore is more broadly defined than is perhaps initially evident. Although the motivations of civic and political participation can overlap, such as in cases where the health and stability of a local community are impacted by governmental policy choices, this definition serves to distinguish the intent of individuals who seek to participate in order to effect change on a systemic level from individuals who seek to participate in order to effect change on a circumstantial level.

Individuals can participate at a number of operational and conceptual levels within a polity. On one end of the spectrum, individuals can participate by voting for candidates who espouse their views, and thereby work fully within the existent political system, even if they ultimately wish to see changes made to the political system itself. On the other end of the spectrum, individuals can rally to protest what they perceive to be a corrupt or dysfunctional political system, and attempt to effect political change outside of the framework of the existent political system. However they choose to do so, individuals participate by utilizing “resources embedded in one's social networks, resources that can be accessed or mobilized through ties in the network”¹⁷ according to a 2008 paper by Lin. This network utilization is an aspect of social capital, a phenomenon described by Putnam in *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community*, which broadly refers to the resources accumulated through the relationships among people in social groups. Social capital has been described as an “elastic”¹⁸

¹⁶ Gil de Zúñiga, Homero et al., "Social Media Use for[...]Political Participation."

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ellison, Nicole B., et al. "The Benefits of Facebook “Friends:” Social Capital and College Students’ Use of Online Social Network Sites."

term, and can be used in a variety of contexts depending on the manner in which it is applied to a study. Bordieu and Wacquant define social capital as “the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.”¹⁹ Using these definitions, individuals engage in political participation by using their social capital to identify and utilize resources in their social networks to effect change on a systemic level.

One channel by which individuals may choose to participate politically is through social movements. Broadly defined in a traditional academic sense, a social movement is a form of collective protest action undertaken by groups of individuals who have come together as the result of some shared grievance or dissatisfaction with a social or political issue. A form of academic analysis of social movements called resource-mobilization theory emerged in the 1970s and first described as such in a 1977 paper by McCarthy and Zald.²⁰ McCarthy and Zald state that past scholars of social movements, prominently Gurr (1970), Turner and Killian (1972), and Smelser (1963) have “strong assumptions that shared grievances and generalized beliefs (loose ideologies) about the causes and possible means of reducing grievances are important preconditions”²¹ for emerging social movements. Resource-mobilization theory, in contrast, offsets the “heavy focus upon the psychological state of the mass of potential movement supporters within a collectivity”²² by instead arguing that “social movements deliver collective goods[...]few individuals will “on their own” bear the costs of working to obtain.”²³ This structures social movements in terms of those resources, and the ability of the social movement

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ McCarthy, John D., and Mayer N. Zald. "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory."

²¹ Ibid., 1214

²² Ibid., 1215

²³ Ibid., 1216

to motivate people toward accomplishing the movement's goals in exchange for otherwise unavailable resources.

For the purposes of this research, an amalgam of the two theories provides a useful working definition of a movement. First, the terms social movement and political movement are loosely interchangeable with the level of specificity necessary for this argument – social movements are often political in nature, and political movements are derived from social networks; regardless, they operate as entities outside the bounds of party politics. A movement itself is a group of individuals brought together by shared grievance or interest to accomplish the transfer of a social or political resource that appears to be most readily available through collective action.

The Internet, and consequently social media, has been linked to both increased and diminished social capital by various scholars. Nie in a 2001 paper argued that “Internet use detracts from face-to-face time with others, which might diminish an individual’s social capital.”²⁴ A variety of other studies have found that online interactions can in fact supplement or replace in-person interactions,²⁵ and stimulate increased community interaction, involvement, and accrued social capital.²⁶ In regards to social capital which could be applied to political participation, more recent research argues that “bridging social capital might be augmented by such sites, which support loose social ties, allowing users to create and maintain larger, diffuse networks of relationships from which they could potentially draw resources”²⁷ and thereby have more developed pathways to participation. Van Laer and Van Aelst state that the Internet “facilitates and supports (traditional) offline collective action in terms of organisation,

²⁴ Ellison et al., “Benefits of Facebook”

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

mobilisation, and transnationalisation and, on the other hand, [creates] new modes of collective action.”²⁸

Sites such as Facebook, which allow otherwise weak ties to be maintained “cheaply and easily”²⁹ by virtue of the technology powering the platform are particularly strong contenders for increased social capital, in this line of theory. According to a Pew Internet Project Study, social media alters the way in which individuals participate in their social networks – Facebook users for example are more trusting, have more close relationships, tend to be more politically engaged than most other people, and revive “dormant” friendships more frequently.³⁰ The type of participation being altered by social media is supported by a 2010 study by Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah,³¹ but with the caveat that the influence can be positive or negative for participation depending on the nature of information which is consumed through these formats. For example, “patterns of media use related to information acquisition (e.g., television news) and community building (e.g., online communities) are positively associated with civic participation, whereas patterns of use related to entertainment and diversion (e.g., reality shows and online movies) have a negative impact on engagement (Shah et al., 2001; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001).”³²

Consequences of Participation: The Gladwell and Shirky Debate

The journalist Malcolm Gladwell wrote an influential and widely debated article for the *New*

²⁸ Van Laer, Jeroen, and Peter Van Aelst. "Cyber-protest and civil society: the Internet and action repertoires in social movements." 231

²⁹ Ellison et al., “Benefits of Facebook”

³⁰ Pew Internet Research “Social Networking Fact Sheet”

³¹ Gil de Zúñiga et al., “Digital democracy: Re-imagining pathways to political participation.”

³² Gil de Zúñiga et al., "Social Media Use for Political Participation."

Yorker in 2010 entitled “Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted”³³ in which he made the argument that social media leads to many weak and diffuse connections among its users. These weak connections, Gladwell argued, are much less likely to successfully engender effective action than are strong personal connections characteristic of many past successful activist causes, such as the American civil rights movement in the 1960s.

Much of Gladwell's argument derives from earlier sociological work examining the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1960s. Gladwell argues that strong-tie connections (between people who share multiple personal links and are motivated to act to help one another) are necessary to effect change in areas of high-risk activism (such as rallies and protests which require a significant deviation from one's schedule otherwise, and which put oneself in harm's way). According to Gladwell, these strong-tie connections were the primary method for traditional forms of activism to successfully rouse support.

In contrast, Gladwell claims that social media tends to form many weak-tie connections among people who are not strongly motivated to go out of their way to act on behalf of one another, but who do share some common goals and are potentially willing to work together to achieve them. Social media increases participation, but it does so by decreasing the level of motivation required to participate. In his words: social media “makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact.”³⁴

Furthermore, Gladwell asserts that social media lacks the hierarchical organization used or sought by many traditional activist organizations, because social media is a tool for building networks rather than hierarchies. This makes social media an adaptable and powerful tool in

³³ Gladwell, Malcolm. "Small Change - Why the revolution will not be tweeted."

³⁴ Ibid.

building networks for low-risk activism, but these networks falter when faced with high-risk activism because they don't have a “centralized leadership structure and clear lines of authority, they have real difficulty reaching consensus and setting goals”³⁵ and are often rendered ineffective.

Gladwell has an academic counterpart in the form of Clay Shirky, a NYU professor who has published several books espousing the usefulness of social media as a political tool, and who has directly responded through a number of letters and published articles to the arguments made by Gladwell. In a 2011 article published in *Foreign Affairs* titled “The Political Power of Social Media” Shirky offers a counterargument to points raised by social media skeptics such as Gladwell. Shirky addresses what Gladwell described in his article as the ineffectiveness of social media, commonly called “slacktivism” by other authors, “whereby casual participants seek social change through low-cost activities, such as joining Facebook's "Save Darfur" group, that are long on bumper-sticker sentiment and short on any useful action.”³⁶ Although Shirky does not contest that this is indeed a facet of social media activism, he states that it is not essential to the strength of social media as a political tool. He writes “the fact that barely committed actors cannot click their way to a better world does not mean that committed actors cannot use social media effectively”³⁷ and cites examples of recent protests, such as India in 2009, South Korea in 2008, and Chile in 2006, which all successfully used social media as a tool to coordinate real-world action rather than as a surrogate for it.

In response to this article, Gladwell replied to Shirky in another *Foreign Affairs* piece later in 2011 written jointly by the two authors. Gladwell wrote that “just because innovations in

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Shirky, Clay. "The Political Power of Social Media."

³⁷ Ibid.

communications technology happen does not mean that they matter; or, to put it another way, in order for an innovation to make a real difference, it has to solve a problem that was actually a problem in the first place.”³⁸ In his view, there is insufficient evidence that pre-Internet and social media revolutions suffered from a lack of cutting-edge communication and organization tools. Even if social media is a large stride forward in technology and Shirky demonstrated recent examples which utilized it as a participation tool, Gladwell remained unconvinced that without social media technology those recent revolutions would not have been possible.

Shirky replied to this argument by dividing Gladwell's question of whether social media was solving a problem that needed resolution into two parts: whether social media has allowed insurgents to adopt new strategies, and whether those strategies have ever been crucial to the success of their movements. To him, an examination of activism in the last decade was “unambiguous”³⁹ and social media clearly answered yes to both of those questions. Shirky describes how social media has altered the dynamics of the public sphere in the following way:

Digital networks have acted as a massive positive supply shock to the cost and spread of information, to the ease and range of public speech by citizens, and to the speed and scale of group coordination. As Gladwell has noted elsewhere, these changes do not allow otherwise uncommitted groups to take effective political action. They do, however, allow committed groups to play by new rules.⁴⁰

An online response to Gladwell written by Zeynep Tufekci, a professor of sociology, further problematizes his argument. Tufekci makes two points: first, that “the key issue facing activists who wish for real social change is the mismatch between the scale of our problems (global) and the natural scale of our sociality (local)”⁴¹ for which social media is a key technological advancement; and second, that “the relationship between weak and strong ties is

³⁸ Gladwell and Shirky. “From Innovation to Revolution”

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Tufekci, Zeynep. “What Gladwell Gets Wrong”

one of complementarity and support, not one of opposition”⁴² which she attributes to a “widespread conceptual error” and an “inadequate understanding of these concepts” on Gladwell's part.

Tufekci argues that the examples of the civil rights movements Gladwell uses to illustrate his technological point are not pertinent because they reflect a different order of magnitude than current issues activists seek to address. She writes that “the problem isn't we can't organize lunch-counter sit-ins or high-risk actions; the problem is they don't matter much” because “decades of neoliberal policies” have “freed the powerful from constraints at the local level.”⁴³ As a result, although our social spheres are local, “the scale of the action required to confront today's problems is global” and requires enforcement on a massive scale. Social media is a technological advance which allows the scale of response to match the scale of the issues being approached.

Altogether the debate between Gladwell and Shirky sets a clear delineation for the conception of social media as a political tool, and the two camps represent strong positions on each end of the spectrum, insofar as the argument requires opposition to take a linear form. Having established the debate over social media, it is time to consider the cases of social movements that have been given life by it.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

Chapter 2:

The Tea Party and Occupy Movements

Charting the development and structure of the Tea Party and Occupy movements requires approaching each case from several different angles. The focus in each historical instance is the role of social media and how it guided the trajectory of each movement. This chapter will address the formation and development, ideology and organizational structure, and demographics of each case in turn.

Formative Roots of the Tea Party

Opinions vary on whether the Tea Party emerged predominantly through the strength of its individual constituents as a grassroots movement, or whether wealthy private interest groups artificially grew the Tea Party into a national force beyond what the strength of its underlying ideology could muster on its own. A 2010 Wall Street Journal article which details the history of the movement from a grassroots perspective states that the movement was “powered predominantly by middle-aged, middle-class Americans with limited political experience”⁴⁴ and “burst out of economic upheaval and the sense among some conservatives that the Republican Party had discarded them.”⁴⁵ In contrast, a 2010 New Yorker article about the Koch brothers argued that “by giving money to educate, fund, and organize Tea Party protesters”⁴⁶ on a massive scale, the Koch brothers “have helped turn their private agenda into a mass movement.”⁴⁷

Whether one or the other of these positions is more factually sound is ultimately a moot point to this argument; the prominent role of social media in developing the Tea Party appears on both

⁴⁴ Blackmon, Douglas A. et al., "Birth of a Movement."

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Meyer, Jane. "Covert Operations: The billionaire brothers who are waging a war against Obama."

⁴⁷ Ibid.

sides of the debate.

The grassroots argument for the Tea Party's formation and development is neatly encapsulated by the previously mentioned Wall Street Journal's 2010 historical piece on the movement. The authors cite “discontent over the financial meltdown, the government bailouts and the election of Barack Obama”⁴⁸ as formative forces which led to the rise of Tea Party ideology, as well as frustration from conservatives who felt “Sen. John McCain's presidential campaign had never fully exploited the Internet to raise money and unite disparate activists”⁴⁹ in stark contrast to Obama's deft usage of technology. These frustrations led to conservatives establishing a social media presence to express their discontent. Michael Patrick Leahy, a Nashville technology consultant, created a list of 25 contacts called “Top Conservatives on Twitter—“#tcot” for short”⁵⁰ which gave like-minded conservatives a rallying point to discuss their views. In December 2008, Leahy organized regular Monday night conference calls among activists who used his #tcot hashtag on Twitter, and which grew to “1,500 [activists] within weeks.”⁵¹ In this narrative, the choices of individuals to share their views on social media led to the genesis of the Tea Party movement.

The stories of individuals such as Amy Kremer and Jenny Beth Martin, a pair of “30-something suburbanites in metro Atlanta, frustrated by recession, dismayed by the election of Barack Obama and waiting for the next chapter of their lives”⁵² who were instrumental in the formation of the Tea Party. Kremer was an ex-flight attendant, who had quit her career to raise her daughter, and occupied herself with running a gardening blog and a political blog.⁵³ Martin

⁴⁸ Blackmon, Douglas A. et al., "Birth of a Movement."

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

was a software engineer and part-time blogger working odd jobs to make ends meet after her husband's business fell through.⁵⁴ Both felt disillusioned with the state of American politics, and were frustrated by what they perceived as inaction by both the Democrat and Republican parties. The two women met via a conference call in early 2009, and used their background as bloggers to help establish national umbrella organizations to bring like-minded people together to act. Martin is the coordinator of the Tea Party Patriots, an “umbrella group claiming affiliation with nearly 3,000 local groups around the U.S.”⁵⁵ and Kremer is the chair of the Tea Party Express, a political action group that has “raised millions of dollars for upstart candidates”⁵⁶ and organized the campaign that tried but ultimately failed to oust Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) in the 2010 election.

According to the Wall Street Journal, the first real-world Tea Party event occurred on February 17th, 2009.⁵⁷ It included an Internet component from the very beginning. The event, a rally of 120 people at a park in Seattle protesting Obama's stimulus package, was organized by a young conservative named Keli Carender who blogged about her protest, as well as “promoted it on a local talk-radio show and emailed conservative blogger and sometime Fox news consultant Michelle Malkin, who wrote about the rally online.”⁵⁸ The protest did not use the name Tea Party, but ideologically fell within what would come to represent the movement.

The Tea Party popularly came to its name via a February 19th, 2009 broadcast by Rick Santelli, a CNBC financial commentator, in what colloquially came to be known by Tea Party supporters as “the rant.”⁵⁹ Santelli's televised rant addressed the Obama administration's

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Attributed February 17th in the WSJ article, but many other sources attribute the protest to the 16th

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

response to the economic recession, in which he spoke increasingly derisively of the stimulus package, and ended by shouting "we're thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July,"⁶⁰ which Santelli later claimed was a free association based on the fact that his daughter was studying the Boston Tea Party in school. Older media met new media in a powerful combination. Santelli's rant went viral on the Internet, quickly spreading across the growing networks of conservatives being connected by new social media groups. Leahy of the #tcot Twitter group tweeted a phone number to hold a conference call on February 20th to discuss the implications of Santelli's speech. A group of more than 20 activists joined the call, including Martin, Kremer, and Carender, as well as "veteran representatives from a range of sizeable causes, some with access to databases stuffed with tens of thousands of contacts."⁶¹ The group organized a series of simultaneous rallies set to occur in urban areas across the country a week later, on February 27th. On that date, approximately 50 rallies sparked by Santelli's Tea Party rant took place, most consisting of "scores or low hundreds of participants."⁶²

In both the grassroots and the private interest narratives of the Tea Party, social media occupies an important position as the space that educates and inspires potential activists to real participation. Disparate activists were connected by common interest and the availability of social media to network them with other like-minded sources, according to the grassroots version of the Tea Party's formation. In the private interest narrative according to journalists such as Jane Meyer reporting for the *New Yorker*, prominent groups supporting the Tea Party received funding from private conservative networks. Groups such as Americans for Prosperity, a prominent Tea Party-affiliated organization, allegedly received significant donations from

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Charles and David Koch, which went toward such projects as establishing a “‘Tea Party Finder’ Web site, advertised as ‘a hub for all the Tea Parties in North Carolina.’”⁶³ Meyer quotes an anonymous Republican campaign consultant who worked with the Koch brothers, saying of their involvement with the Tea Party, ‘The Koch brothers gave the money that founded it. It’s like they put the seeds in the ground. Then the rainstorm comes, and the frogs come out of the mud—and they’re our candidates!’”⁶⁴

The initial proposal for the Tea Party Express—what subsequently became the political action committee Amy Kremer chaired after her activist beginnings, and which a Politico report describes as “among the most identifiable brands of the tea party movement”⁶⁵—outlined the format of what it called the “‘tea party’ establishment”⁶⁶ which it was attempting to join. Most of the establishment constituents that the proposal identified existed predominantly within the sphere of social media. The proposal mentions Michelle Malkin (a conservative blogger), Eric Odom of Don’t Go Movement (a Tea Party group described elsewhere as “an online rapid response team”⁶⁷ for issues pertaining to the movement), Smart Girl Politics (a blog and social media network for conservative women), Top Conservatives on Twitter, and Freedom Works (an online hub for conservative activists); all of which approach political participation through social media.

Ideology of the Tea Party

Since there is no single central website or authority figure for the Tea Party movement, its

⁶³ Meyer, Jane. “Covert Operations”

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Vogel, Kenneth P. “GOP operatives crash the tea party.”

⁶⁶ “‘The Tea Party Express’ project proposal draft.” Politico. Accessed April 27, 2015. http://www.politico.com/static/PPM154_teapartyexpress041709.html.

⁶⁷ Good, Chris. “The Tea Party Movement: Who’s In Charge?”

core principles fluctuate among the various prominent authority organizations that help to structure the national chapters of the movement. Defining the goals of the Tea Party therefore requires examining an amalgamation of its various sources of authority. Frequently cited Tea Party authorities include the organization Americans for Prosperity which describes itself as “a network of citizens that work on behalf of freedom for their communities”⁶⁸ by “leaving our children with more financial security,”⁶⁹ as well as “protecting opportunity for all, by preventing red tape from stifling[...]small businesses and entrepreneurs”⁷⁰ and “getting government to clear the way for every American, not just special interests.”⁷¹ The organization FreedomWorks which states that it is “over 6 million Americans who are passionate about promoting free markets and individual liberty”⁷² and who share “a desire for less government, lower taxes, and more economic freedom.”⁷³ The organization Tea Party Patriots which calls itself “home to millions who have come together to pursue the American Dream and to keep that Dream alive for their children and grandchildren”⁷⁴ by following the three guiding principles of “Personal Freedom, Economic Freedom, and Debt-Free Future.”⁷⁵ Finally, the website most simply titled TeaParty.org defines the movement as “a grassroots movement that calls awareness to any issue which challenges the security, sovereignty, or domestic tranquility of our beloved nation, the United States of America.”⁷⁶

⁶⁸ "About Americans for Prosperity." Americans for Prosperity. <http://americansforprosperity.org/about-americans-for-prosperity>.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² "About FreedomWorks." FreedomWorks. Accessed April 27, 2015. <http://www.freedomworks.org/about/about-freedomworks>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "Tea Party Patriots | Our Vision." Tea Party Patriots. Accessed April 27, 2015. <http://www.teapartypatriots.org/ourvision/>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ "About Us - Tea Party." TeaParty.org. Accessed April 27, 2015. <http://www.teaparty.org/about-us/>.

Demographics of the Tea Party

A demographic analysis of the Tea Party based on available poll data helps illustrate who of the American people the movement claims to represent actually constitute its most active supporters. Given the shifting and amorphous nature of decentralized political movements, the data from various demographics polls must be taken with several grains of salt. It is inconclusive how well any given poll represents the total group of Tea Party supporters, and some polls include a mix of respondents who say they support the Tea Party but are not active in it with those who consider themselves integral and active members of the movement. Since there is again no formal census of Tea Party membership, makers of polls are forced to establish their own demographic metrics of inclusion, which may or may not result in a representative picture of the movement's constituency as a whole.

Gallup/USA Today conducted a demographic survey of Americans in March 2010 that consisted of telephone interviews with 1,033 national adults, aged 18 and older, which they extrapolated to 95% confidence ($\pm 4\%$) in their results across the total sample of national adults. The survey found that 28% of adults in the United States identify themselves as supporters of the Tea Party.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Tea Party supporters are significantly more likely than average American adults to be Republican and conservative-leaning in their views: 49% of Tea Party supporters are Republican, compared to 28% of all US adults, and 70% identify as conservative compared to 40% of all US adults. Tea Party supporters are also slightly more likely to be male (55% of supporters compared to 49% of all US adults) and occupy a higher income bracket (55% of supporters are in the \$50,000 and above bracket compared to 50% of all US adults).

Yet despite these differences, the Gallup survey found that Tea Party supporters were

⁷⁷ Saad, Lydia. "Tea Partiers Are Fairly Mainstream in Their Demographics."

similar to the rest of the nation in other metrics. Across age, educational background, employment status, and race, the survey found Tea Party supporters to be more or less in line with the national average. Tea Party supporters in all age brackets (18-29, 30-49, 50-64, 65+) were within 2 percentage points of the national average, and likewise in education (across no college, some college, college graduate, postgraduate). 49% of Tea Party supporters are employed full-time compared to 47% of all US adults, and the similarity continues across part-time, retired, homemaker, student, and unemployed figures; only 6% of Tea Party supporters were unemployed, which was still close to the 8% recorded for all US adults. Racially 79% of Tea Party supporters identified as non-Hispanic white (75% across all US adults), 6% as non-Hispanic black (11% across all US adults), and 15% as another race.

The data from this survey provides a good foundation for understanding the constituency of the Tea Party, but it is not without limitations. Foremost is the lack of distinction between Tea Party supporters and Tea Party activists in the sample group. As one analyst of the data put it, “It's one thing to tell a Gallup pollster that you support something; it's another to show up at a rally and hold a sign.”⁷⁸ This makes it more of a guessing game to infer who among the respondents translated their support into real action for the Tea Party, be that going to rallies or creating and disseminating social media content. What the data does provide is a useful snapshot of the similarities between Tea Party supporters and the rest of adults in the country. Rather than occupying an immediately identifiable demographic niche, supporters of the Tea Party movement largely fit into the statistical norm of US adults.

An analyst from The Atlantic reporting on the Gallup survey argued that, in contrast to the findings, there might be “a slight [*sic*] divergence between the tea party movement's leaders

⁷⁸ Good, Chris "Who Are the Tea Partiers?"

and its rank-and-file participants.”⁷⁹ The difference he suggests is that, in his experience interacting with organizers of local Tea Party groups, “a disproportionate amount, compared to the national population)”⁸⁰ of Tea Party supporters who take on leadership roles are “older, middle- and upper-middle-aged”⁸¹ small business owners. The Gallup data doesn't necessarily provide an answer to this possibility one way or the other, but the analyst suggests a reasonable hypothesis for why this would be: older small business owners tend to have developed leadership skills, are invested in the structure of political and economic systems in the United States, and naturally have the business-related incentive to support fiscal-conservatism that would lower taxes.⁸²

Supplementing this data is a later New York Times/CBS poll of Tea Party backers conducted in April 2010 nationwide via telephone with 1,580 adults. The poll's disclaimer states that “[f]or the purposes of analysis, Tea Party supporters were oversampled, for a total of 881, and then weighted back to their proper proportion in the poll.”⁸³ The margin of sampling error is $\pm 3\%$ for both all adults and Tea Party supporters, and higher for subgroups. No overall confidence in the data was expressed via a percentage.

The demographics section of the poll found several notable divergences between Tea Party supporters and the group of all respondents. The introduction notes “its supporters are more affluent and better educated than the general public. They tend to be white, male, and married. They are loyal Republicans, with conservative opinions on a variety of issues.”⁸⁴ 59% of

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ "Polling the Tea Party." The New York Times. Last modified April 14, 2010. Accessed April 27, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/04/14/us/politics/20100414-tea-party-poll-graphic.html?ref=politics>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Tea Party supporters were men (10% greater than all respondents), 89% were white (12% greater), 75% were above the age of 45 (25% greater), and 54% affiliated with the Republican party (26% greater). In personal affairs, 70% stated they were married (18% greater), 50% described themselves as middle class (10% greater), 15% as upper-middle class (5% greater), and 37% had a college or higher degree (12% greater). Financially, 56% reported an income of \$50,000 or higher (12% greater), and 70% described their household financial situation as fairly good (6% greater). 32% of Tea Party supporters were retired, compared to 18% of all respondents.

In their relation to the Tea Party, the poll found a number of identifiable differences between the views of its supporters and the general public. 84% of its supporters felt that “the views of the people involved in the Tea Party movement generally reflect the views of most Americans”⁸⁵ (59% greater than all respondents), and 80% thought there was some or a lot of difference between the Tea Party movement and the Republican party (40% greater). 50% of supporters felt that the Tea Party was politically active in their community (29% greater), and 45% felt that the main goal of the Tea Party should be to “reduce federal government.”

Among the most telling information about Tea Party supporters that the poll relates is its data about their methods of participation. 2% of supporters stated they had donated money to the movement, 13% attended a rally or meeting, and 5% had done both. In contrast, 78% of Tea Party supporters had done neither. 24% of supporters stated that they got their information about the Tea Party from the Internet, 4% from email, and 47% from television. Finally, 45% of supporters stated that they were more likely to trust information from other Tea Party supporters,

⁸⁵ Ibid.

and 37% from newspaper or television.⁸⁶

These results are largely in line with the Gallup poll, and suggest similar trends, although the New York Times/CBS poll indicates a larger proportion of somewhat affluent older conservative white men making up the core constituency of Tea Party supporters. The New York Times/CBS poll also indicates a significantly higher number of retirees involved in the Tea Party compared to the Gallup data – 32% instead of 24%. The most useful supplementary information is the data related to methods of participation among supporters. Only 15% of those who expressed support actually translated that support into conventional participation. A statistic that would have been useful but that the poll did not gather was the incidence of Tea Party supporters who wrote blogs, shared articles, or otherwise engaged in the movement through social media directly. Given the prevalence of social media in the Tea Party movement narrative, and that nearly a quarter of supporters primarily acquired their information about the movement from the Internet, that number is certainly a consequential one.

Formative Roots of the Occupy Movement

If the Tea Party movement's origins can be attributed to Rick Santelli's famous rant, then the Occupy movement's origins can be similarly traced to a July 13, 2011 blog post by the Canadian anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters*. The post began by asking “*Are you ready for a Tahrir moment?*”⁸⁷ It encouraged its readers to “flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street”⁸⁸ on September 17th, where the protesters

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Lasn, Kalle. "#OCCUPYWALLSTREET." <https://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html>. Last modified July 13, 2011. Accessed April 27, 2015.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

“shall incessantly repeat one simple demand in a plurality of voices.”⁸⁹ In a nod to the power struggle occurring within conservative politics at the time, the *Adbusters* writers urged those interested in their Occupy movement to take “a step beyond the Tea Party movement, where, instead of being caught helpless by the current power structure, we the people start getting what we want.”⁹⁰ The Twitter hashtag #OCCUPYWALLSTREET was emblazoned in multiple places across the post, providing a unifying point for dissemination of the message across social media platforms. Vlad Teichberg, an Occupy activist and co-founder of the website Global Revolution TV which livestreams video footage of protest activity, said of the *Adbusters* blog “Not that many people read *Adbusters* itself, but that idea went viral. People were talking about it, discussing it, organizing around it.”⁹¹

This call to action advocated for some degree of spontaneity, but the structure of the protest itself was planned in advance. Groups of “young political activists and older veterans of the anti-corporate globalization protests and other late 20th and early 21st century social movements, as well as an assortment of politically-minded artists, writers, and students”⁹² met in the form of general assembly meetings, in which anyone could participate and vote within the collective decision-making body that directed the Occupy movement. These meetings discussed “how to go about taking public space in Manhattan, in close proximity to Wall Street, as well as how to best frame the protest”⁹³ and set up organizational subgroups among the participants.

Kalle Lasn, the co-founder of *Adbusters*, said of the initial stage of the movement:

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Lalinde, Jaime et al., "Revolution Number 99."

⁹² Milkman, Ruth, Stephanie Luce, and Penny Lewis. "Changing the Subject: A Bottom-Up Account of Occupy Wall Street in New York City." 5

⁹³ Ibid.

The left had been chattering on about revolutions for a long time, but we've basically been howling at the moon. And then, all of a sudden, a bunch of young people [in Egypt] using social media were able to mobilize not just 500 or 5,000 people, but 50,000 people. They inspired us with their courage and with their techniques.⁹⁴

Lasn was not the only activist inspired by the impact of social media on other non-party political movements. A New York Times article published on November 24th, 2011 surveyed the social media presence of the Occupy movement across Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and blogging sites such as Tumblr after the initial Zuccotti Park encampment near Wall Street had gained traction. On YouTube, related to Occupy were "1.7 million videos, viewed 73 million times, that are tagged with the keyword "occupy" in YouTube's News and Politics category."⁹⁵ Facebook at the time counted more than 400 Occupy-related pages with a combined 2.7 million fans.⁹⁶ Supporters of the Occupy movement on Twitter used the hashtag #ows to help create an ongoing narrative of the movement's activity, and the primary Twitter account associated with the movement, @occupywallstreet, grew to 94,000 followers. The daily volume of Twitter posts about the Occupy movement averaged 400,000 to 500,000 a day since October 7th, according to a social media analytics firm that researched the movement.⁹⁷ Another popular offshoot of the movement was a Tumblr blog called "We Are the 99% Percent", based on the famous slogan of the Occupy movement created by the anthropologist David Graeber. The blog collected and published user-submitted personal stories of Americans who had been adversely affected by the issues Occupy was protesting.

The importance of these figures is not strictly tied to their numeric value; not all social media activity is created equal. Given that, the numbers do still provide an approximation of the

⁹⁴ Lalinde, Jaime et al., "Revolution Number 99."

⁹⁵ Preston, Jennifer. "Protesters Look for Ways to Feed the Web."

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

function and impact that each platform added to the movement. The number of fans a Facebook page has imparts relatively little information, since someone can easily press the “like” button, and then never pay any further attention to the page itself. Facebook's content algorithms will likely tailor the news that person receives toward the subject matter of content they “like,” but creating real participation out of Facebook pages requires the individual to become active primarily through the passive absorption of related information. Twitter posts indicate interest and some activity on the part of individuals, but on a macro scale only show the amount of awareness among the Twitter community rather than the amount of active support. YouTube videos and blog posts, such as the stories of We Are the 99 Percent, provide a better margin of participation, since taking and uploading video content or writing personal stories requires comparatively more investment of time and energy on the part of individual participants.

Social media played a foundational role in disseminating information about the movement and gathering supporters, but it was by no means the exclusive source of momentum. The in-person presence of protests in New York, and eventually other metropolitan locations around the country, provided social media activity information for consumption and distribution, which in turn shaped the movement. David Graeber, who became a figurehead for the Zuccotti Park protest in New York, said of his arrival to the protest:

I got there in the morning and took a couple of pictures and put them on my Twitter account. The Occupy Wall Street Twitter account put out a message saying, Hey, David Graeber is down there. He seems to know what’s going on. Within two hours, I had 2,000 followers. Suddenly I was the communications system [for the entire protest].⁹⁸

What was happening on the ground mattered as much as what was happening in cyberspace, and what occurred in one frequently influenced the other.

⁹⁸ Lalinde, Jaime et al., "Revolution Number 99."

Ideology of the Occupy Movement

An analysis of the Occupy movement's history by Milkman, Luce, and Lewis argues that “Occupy Wall Street, in short, was not a spontaneous eruption but rather an action carefully planned by committed activists for whom the *Adbusters* call represented only the latest in a series of efforts to focus public attention on the injustices associated with the global economic crisis and the staggering growth of inequality in the 21st century.”⁹⁹ The difference between Occupy and past efforts was its “spectacular success in attracting media attention and its ability to gain traction with the broader public”¹⁰⁰ which propelled it into the spotlight. A key part of the Occupy movement's stance was its somewhat ambiguous relationship with what, precisely, it was demanding.

The *Adbusters* blog post did supply one central demand: that Obama “ordain a Presidential Commission tasked with ending the influence money has over our representatives in Washington.”¹⁰¹ However, a point of contention for the Occupy movement, both among its active participants and in more distant analytical circles, was that Occupy Wall Street once in motion refused to define its set of demands. Many interviewees in the Milkman, Luce, and Lewis study “passionately defended that aspect of [Occupy] and indeed, argued that it was a key ingredient in the movement's appeal.”¹⁰² One interviewee was quoted as describing Occupy as a “floating signifier that everybody saw different things in”¹⁰³ and another interviewee argued similarly:

It allowed there not to be one issue. As soon as there's one issue, then I alienate the two of you who don't have my issue. But with this hashtag, t-shirt, icon style of organizing, everyone showed up. And we could

⁹⁹ Milkman, Luce, and Lewis. “Changing the Subject” 6

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ <https://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html>

¹⁰² Milkman, Luce, and Lewis. “Changing the Subject” 22

¹⁰³ Ibid.

project onto Occupy whatever our issues were.¹⁰⁴

In a table titled “Issues That Led Respondents to Support OWS, by Extent of Involvement, 2012” the study found that the top three driving issues for all respondents in the movement were “Inequality/the 1%” well in the lead at 47.5%, “Money in politics/Frustration with D.C.” at 25.5%, and “Corporate Greed” at 18.5%.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, the ordering of these issues among less active and more active participants, which the study categorized by involvement in 6 types of activities, remained relatively consistent across all subgroups.

Websites that functioned (and continue to do so) as the most active hubs for the Occupy movement suggest a similar common grouping of issues as the motivation behind the movement. Fighting a power disparity based on economic standing, most popularly described in terms of the 99 percent versus the 1 percent, occurs repeatedly in the rhetoric on the websites.

OccupyWallSt.org describes Occupy as a “people-powered movement[...]fighting back against the corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process, and the role of Wall Street in creating an economic collapse that has caused the greatest recession in generations.”¹⁰⁶ OccupyTogether.org states that the movement “aims to fight back against the system that has allowed the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer. We no longer want the wealthiest to hold all the power, to write the rules governing an unbalanced and inequitable global economy, and thus foreclosing on our future.”¹⁰⁷ The website for the NYC General Assembly published a declaration on September 29th, 2011 articulating the grievances of the movement's constituents which began:

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 23

¹⁰⁶ "About Us | OccupyWallSt." Occupy Wall Street. Accessed April 27, 2015. <http://occupywallst.org/about/>.

¹⁰⁷ "Occupy Together | About." Occupy Together. Accessed April 27, 2015. <http://www.occupytogether.org/aboutoccupy/#background>.

As one people, united, we acknowledge the reality: that the future of the human race requires the cooperation of its members; that our system must protect our rights, and upon corruption of that system, it is up to the individuals to protect their own rights, and those of their neighbors; that a democratic government derives its just power from the people, but corporations do not seek consent to extract wealth from the people and the Earth; and that no true democracy is attainable when the process is determined by economic power.¹⁰⁸

Demographics of the Occupy Movement

Similar to what is available for the Tea Party, demographic information pertaining to the Occupy movement is scattered and subject to a variety of limitations. Surveys that collected information tended to focus on either online supporters or the Zuccotti Park camp of protesters, and provide limited overall context. The most reliable trends emerge across multiple surveys, and are at least suggestive of the constituency of the movement, but do not illustrate it with precision. As with the surveys cited for the demographics of the Tea Party, these studies were forced to establish their own metrics of inclusion which may or may not have been representative of the decentralized movement as a whole.

OccupyResearch.net released a survey on the demographics and political participation of Occupy activists on March 23, 2012. The survey initially was designed to conduct a simple random sampling of face-to-face data collection from members of Occupy camps, but prior to and during the survey period many of the Occupy camps were shut down by police. The survey was instead distributed among 883 Occupy-related Facebook groups, sent to 505 email addresses publicly associated with Occupy groups, and advertised on the homepage of OccupyTogether.org during the survey period from December 7th, 2011 to January 7th, 2012. During this time 5,074 surveys were completed, 99.3% online, and of the 4,382 who answered the question “Where did you find the link to this survey,” 57% said via a link from Facebook,

¹⁰⁸ "Declaration of the Occupation of New York City." NYC General Assembly. Accessed April 27, 2015. <http://www.nycga.net/resources/documents/declaration/>.

20% from a personal contact, 12% from occupytogether.org, 7.3% from Twitter, and 4% from occupyresearch.net.¹⁰⁹

The self-described limitations of information from this survey are that it is non-random and therefore does not carry external validity; as an online survey its data is “deeply biased to reflect the demographics and political participation characteristics of those with greater levels of Internet access;”¹¹⁰ and the high proportion of respondents who found the survey via Facebook skews the results, such as in the responses to questions about recent Occupy-related media use.

Among the findings for the personal backgrounds of Occupy respondents are that 52.9% of the survey respondents identified as women, 43.7% as men, and about 1% (50) as transgender. In terms of ethnicity, 80.8% identified as white, and the next most prevalent were Latino/a (5.3%), Asian/Pacific Islander (5.4%), Native American (5.3%), and African American (2.9%). The average respondent age was 42. 45% were between the ages of 25 and 44, followed by those between 44 and 64, and one out of five respondents were under 25 or over 65. By education, 29.8% had graduate degrees, 26% completed college, and 23% completed some college. Yet for economic status, 49.2% of the respondents identified as working or lower middle class. 54.4% reported their annual income as less than \$50,000, and just under one third were employed full time. 8.6% reported being unemployed, 7.6% stated they were underemployed, and 17.6% were students.

The respondents demonstrated a very high degree of engagement with the Occupy movement – 86.8% of survey respondents self-identified as participants in Occupy Wall Street, and 59% had previously been involved in other social movements. A vast majority, 91.3% of all

¹⁰⁹ "Preliminary Findings: Occupy Research Demographic and Political Participation Survey." Occupy Research.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

respondents, reported performing some type of activity related to the Occupy movement. The most common activities included 74.3% who posted on Facebook, and 72.7% who held face-to-face conversations about the movement, 59.7% who signed petitions, and 49.3% who marched in protests. Less common but still prevalent were 38.8% who donated money, 23.7% who contributed food, or supplies to a protester camp; another 23.7% who made phone calls to elected officials; and 18.7% who organized events or actions pertaining to the movement. In terms of social media content generation, 18.3% wrote blog posts, and 7.9% made videos about Occupy.

Heavy social media usage was widely present in respondents, although this is at least partly a result of the proportion of respondents who arrived at the survey via Facebook. 63.7% of respondents reported using Facebook within the past 24 hours, 43.8% reported visiting Occupy movement websites in the past 24 hours, and 42.6% used word of mouth for Occupy news and information in the past 24 hours. 41.5% reported using email services, 29.2% were YouTube users, 23.7% used blogs, 23.3% used Twitter, and 19.2% used livestreaming video websites. In contrast, 23.8% used newspapers, 17.3% used TV, and another 17.3% used radio.

A significant trend was that respondents were active political participants, but not necessarily through the channels of party politics. 52.5% belonged to political parties, yet only 21.6% of respondents reported being actively involved. 38.4% declared that they were independent or did not identify with any political party, while an almost equal 37.9% declared that they sympathized with the Democratic party. 22.6% of the respondents reported a diverse array of many other parties and political causes, and a modest 1.1% identified with the Republican party. A decisive 91% had signed petitions and 89.9% “boycotted or deliberately

bought certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons.”¹¹¹ 77% contacted or attempted to contact a politician or civil servant to express their views, and 67.7% donated money or raised funds for a social or political activity. 66.6% reported having taken part in demonstrations, 65% joined an Internet political forum or discussion group, 62.5% attended a political meeting or rally in the last year, and 40% contacted or appeared in the media to express their views.¹¹²

The results from this survey are indicative of how the extended Occupy support network beyond the protest camps is composed. Given the bias toward Facebook arrivals, the data from OccupyResearch.org is definitely not representative of the movement as a whole, nor does it claim to be. It is therefore useful to consider another survey which focuses on the population of Occupy protesters who were active in New York City itself.

Milkman, Luce, and Lewis conducted a large-scale survey of New York City Occupy participants and supporters, the goal of which was to “capture active supporters of the movement”¹¹³ rather than attitudes toward the Occupy movement. The study used a sampling methodology “developed and widely deployed in Europe for the study of large protest demonstrations (Walgrave 2007; Walgrave and Verhulst 2011)”¹¹⁴ which they state “allowed us to obtain a representative sample of the rally and march participants.”¹¹⁵ The 729 survey participants were selected from people who attended a May 1st, 2012 Occupy-sponsored rally in New York City, and the surveyors conducted an additional 25 in-depth interviews with a group they describe as “25 core Occupy activists.”¹¹⁶ The report by the authors also contrasts their own

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Milkman, Luce, and Lewis. “Changing the Subject” 3

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 1

survey data with information collected about all New York City residents from the 2011 American Community Survey.

The authors note that “Occupy has often been compared to the Tea Party in that it is a largely 'middle class' and white movement and in that its participants have views outside the political mainstream (albeit at the other end of the left-right spectrum).”¹¹⁷ Compared to New York City residents, Occupy activists were “disproportionately highly educated, young and white, with higher than average household incomes.”¹¹⁸ 42% of all respondents identified as female and 55% as male, and 62% identified as non-Hispanic whites. In comparison, the average by New York City residents is 52% female, and 33% non-Hispanic white. 37% of all respondents were under the age of 30, compared to 28% of NYC residents. Furthermore, respondents who qualified as “actively involved” within the Occupy movement were significantly more youthful: 60% of those under 30 were actively involved, compared to 54% over the age of 30. 76% reported having a bachelor's degree or higher education, whereas only 34% of NYC residents age 25 and up had completed college. 36% of respondents reported their annual income as being more than \$100,000, compared to the 24% of NYC residents who occupied the same bracket of household income in 2011.

A common characteristic of respondents was that many had substantial debt, had experienced recent job loss, or reported being underemployed. In this category there was also a noticeable gap based on age. 53.8% of respondents under 30 reported having at least \$1,000 in student loans, compared to 28% of respondents over 30. 36.6% of respondents under 30 reported having been laid off or lost a job in the past 5 years, compared to 25.7% of respondents over 30.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 16

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 9

In contrast, 34.9% of older respondents held credit card debt over \$1,000 compared to 19.4% of younger respondents. Among respondents who were employed, excluding students and retirees, 24% reported working less than 35 hours a week. Respondents under 30 were even more likely to work less (29% at less than 35 hours a week), and 33% of respondents who the survey classified as actively involved in Occupy worked less than 35 hours a week.

In line with the results from OccupyResearch.net, Milkman, Luce, and Lewis found that among “the most striking aspects of the interviews we conducted was the vast political experience of the core activists themselves[...]this was also true of most participants in the May 1, 2012 rally and march.”¹¹⁹ 44% of all respondents stated that they had been involved in some type of protest activity before their 18th birthday, and another 38% had done so between the time that they were 18 and 22. 42% of respondents reported being involved in 30 or more protest marches or rallies, and 26% had been arrested for political activities at some point in their lives. Choices pertaining to party politics showed a sizable portion of Democrats (33.8%), almost no Republicans (0.5%), and a large proportion of respondents who identified as Independents (24.3%), supported third parties (13.1%), or did not identify with any party (20.6%).

Conspicuous by its absence in the survey data is the relationship of social media to respondents. This is an unfortunate exclusion, but seems in line with the scope of the study – the authors appeared less concerned with the mechanisms by which the participants ended up at the Occupy rally and march, and more interested in what they were doing once they were there. Nonetheless, the information is largely useful for crafting a demographic picture of the Occupy movement in conjunction with the data from the OccupyResearch.net study. With the histories and data from this chapter, there is ample material to analyze.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 15

Chapter 3:

Analysis

As the introduction states, there are three questions this research aims to answer that cumulatively provide an outlook on how social media influences political participation. The collected historical and demographic information about both the Tea Party and Occupy movements, alongside the argument framed by Malcolm Gladwell and Clay Shirky, establish a useful foundation for addressing these points. This chapter examines three aspects of the relationship between social media and political participation: the nature of change to the act of participation; the change to political networks; and the change to institutions.

Participation: Nature and Logistics

Did the advent of social media change the nature of participation, or the logistics of participation? The differences between the Occupy and Tea Party movement's utilization of social media suggests that there are multiple degrees to the answer, depending on the desired outcome of using social media. The Tea Party had conventional political goals it wanted to accomplish, including getting candidates into office who supported the views represented on Tea Party social media platforms. Rather than rallying against the system itself, the Tea Party rallied against the actors using the system. Social media played an organizational role in this capacity, such as the Top Conservatives on Twitter network bringing together activists who shared similar ideas, or Freedom Works connecting and training interested recruits. This usage of social media was more of a change to the logistics of organization rather than the nature of participation itself.

The Occupy movement, in contrast to the Tea Party, organized itself around an

amorphous set of goals, with no explicitly articulated demands. Social media was used as an organizational tool, certainly, but it also served a more instrumental purpose that would not necessarily have been present had social media technology not existed. *Adbusters* distributed the original message that brought Occupy into existence, and in fact claimed that protesters would “repeat one simple demand”¹²⁰ at the protests, but subsequently lost control over the direction of the movement. Through social media, the *Adbusters* message was widely disseminated, debated, and reshaped, even though the magazine itself had a relatively small readership. The primary drivers of the message became those who passed it along channels of social media. Between the time of the original message and the September 17th Occupy Wall Street protest, the message had changed from one simple demand to no single demand, and instead expressed frustration with a variety of interconnected issues. Without the direction and momentum provided by social media, there would not have been an equivalently effective medium for the initial idea to have spread, foster discussion, and evolve into what ultimately drew the most supporters to the protests. The usage of social media in this case points toward a way in which social media changes the nature of participation: providing a new tool for individuals to dictate the ideological narrative of a movement.

By decentralizing the responsibility of information dissemination and passing it to social media users, those users are also empowered to selectively represent information, and in turn contribute toward a communal narrative. In the case of Occupy, this allowed the single demand part of the message to be pruned away without derailing the entire protest narrative. Returning to the Suomen Toivo definition of social media's distinguishing features as an emergent communications technology, several features specifically augment this decentralization: the

¹²⁰ Lasn, Kalle. "#OCCUPYWALLSTREET."

speed of information dissemination, the lack of uniform hierarchy in digital space, and the shift in user preference from objectivity to subjectivity. These factors enable social media users to influence the trajectory of a spreading message in a way that is distinctively new.

In order for the influence of social media to be effective on a movement's direction, the created narrative must be sustained by real-world outcomes. Returning to the case of Occupy Wall Street, the social media narrative that established no explicit demands was supported by the actual protesters in September. As the interviewees in the Milkman, Luce, and Lewis study from the previous chapter were quoted saying, having no articulated central demand allowed the Occupy movement to malleably fit the needs of a multifarious constituency. Since the narrative established on social media was supported by those who took the additional step of participating in person, it continued to be perpetuated. Had the no-demand structure proven ineffective at generating support from protesters, it seems likely that the narrative established on social media would have struggled to sustain itself. Similarly, had the *Adbusters* group maintained a firmer grip on their original one-demand message, it is plausible that the movement would not have achieved nearly the same widespread participation. This is evident from the poll results of Occupy participants; the Milkman, Luce, and Lewis study alone received 14 different answers for which issues led their respondents to actively support Occupy.¹²¹

While the Occupy movement needed the narrative-shaping influence of social media to establish itself outside of the bounds of electoral politics, the Tea Party was interested in staying largely within the realm of election-based goals. The utility of social media for the Tea Party therefore was primarily superior organization rather than superior ideological development. That being said, it is a reductionist approach to refer to the movements as single entities in this way,

¹²¹ Milkman, Luce, and Lewis "Changing the Subject" 23

albeit not necessarily an incorrect one. A key feature both movements shared was decentralized and largely horizontal leadership, split into localized subgroups connected either by physical location or Internet network. Some of these subgroups within the greater movements focused more on rhetoric, and others on action. While the Top Conservatives on Twitter group used their network to hold conference calls and plan rallies for the Tea Party, other conservative social networks such as Smart Girl Politics used their clout to educate interested new activists and spread awareness of the movement and its principles. Of their presence on more mainstream social networks, Smart Girl Politics stated that “[i]n 2009, the #sgp hashtag was the seventh most used hashtag for the year on Twitter. By 2010, our team had successfully promoted #sgp to number three on that same list.”¹²² On the whole, however, the message being spread was still one which operated through conventional political channels. The mission statement of Smart Girl Politics called for education reform, a simplified tax structure, and “[r]educing legislation that puts unnecessary constraints on individuals and families”¹²³ – all of which function through elected officials. Hence, though there may have been variations in approach from one subgroup of each movement to another, the overall message remained consistent on a macro scale.

Occupy and the Tea Party demonstrate that social media has changed both the nature and logistics of political participation in social movements. A final point on this topic that bears revisiting is the argument of scale raised by Zeynep Tufekci in response to Gladwell's critique of social media activism. Tufekci argues that because the “only globally-organized actors are large and powerful interests – corporations and nation-states”¹²⁴ protest-based movements in contemporary politics need the tools to address issues on a global scale. Making powerful global

¹²² "About Smart Girl Politics." Smart Girl Politics. Accessed April 27, 2015. <http://www.sgpaaction.com/about>.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Tufekci, Zeynep. "What Gladwell Gets Wrong"

actors “behave in a sustainable manner would require gutting all their alternatives and completely encircling them so that they cannot escape from citizen mandates”¹²⁵ which requires communication technologies that can coordinate many multiple local protest actions simultaneously and efficiently. Without the Internet and social media, alternative communication technologies that can deliver this on an equitable scale are few and far between.

In a sense this positions social media as both an evolution of existent technology and a departure. It is an evolution in the sense that is simply the latest and most efficient type of communication technology, which itself is not especially surprising or interesting that political movements would gravitate toward using it. What is a radical departure is that by being a new evolution that is so efficient, widespread, and global in nature, the scope of issues that can be included in normative protests is widely increased. Protests against underlying social issues such as economic inequality or politicians moving away from a perceived 'American Dream' do not necessarily resonate as broad social issues when they are discrete, localized, and do not have a connective narrative to bring them together. With the scale of simultaneous protest demonstrating that these are issues which motivate a wider group to protest, it is easier to superimpose a grand narrative to the actions of the localized many. It is difficult to imagine Occupy or the Tea Party gaining traction with an underlying communications system that was not the same combination of near instantaneous, horizontally-organized, widely available, and more or less unregulated in the traditional sense.

Social Media and Political Networks

Did social media change the nature of political networks, and as a result how does social

¹²⁵ Ibid.

media control translate into real political power? Among the questions examined in this research, this in particular relates most directly to the Gladwell and Shirky debate on social media activism. Social media has changed the nature of political networks, but it has not done so evenly across all demographics. The audience that has proven most receptive to participation through social media appears to exist on a relatively clear socioeconomic scale. A 1986 paper by Stanford sociologist Doug McAdam described the concept of “biographical availability” which he defined as “the absence of personal constraints that may increase the costs and risks of movement participation, such as full-time employment, marriage, and family responsibilities.”¹²⁶ Individuals who are more biographically available are more likely to be willing to participate in high-cost (time and energy) and high-risk (potential loss of personal status or security) activities related to a movement they support.

Biographical availability plays a clear role in both the Occupy and Tea Party movements. Milkman, Luce, and Lewis argue that in the Occupy movement biographical availability was linked to the presence of many supporters who were younger than 30 and reported being underemployed (therefore with more downtime than if they were fully-employed), alongside the prevalent bodies of students and retirees.¹²⁷ An interviewee's comments reinforce this prospect:

The people going out to organize, at least in the beginning, were people who had expectations rather than people who've already been harmed..... College students in particular, who went to college so they could have a better life, and then finished college with debt and can't get a job.¹²⁸

Similarly in the Tea Party, demographics surveys showed a high number of retirees among the movement's supporters. Although they did not appear as statistically significant, individuals who were out of work or underemployed, such as Amy Kremer and Jenny Beth Martin whose stories

¹²⁶ McAdam, Doug. "Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer." 70

¹²⁷ Milkman, Luce, and Lewis “Changing the Subject” 13

¹²⁸ Ibid., 14

were told in the previous chapter, played pivotal roles in the development of the Tea Party by starting blogs and other conservative social media networks.

Gladwell cites the same McAdam study in his original critique of social media activism, but on the subject of strong- and weak-tie connections rather than biographical availability.¹²⁹ Strong-tie connections are those among people who share multiple personal links and are motivated to act to help one another. Gladwell argues that strong-tie connections are necessary to effect change in areas of high-risk/high-cost activism, such as rallies and protests, which put an individual's security, well-being, and status in jeopardy, as well as requiring more effort on the part of the individual to participate.

McAdam labels the group of all like-minded potential participants who could make the choice of participating in a movement the group whose "attitudinal affinity"¹³⁰ matches that of the movement. Attitudinal affinity is the broadest category of potential participants, and in his research the significantly smaller subgroup of those who shared strong-tie connections (and who would act as recruiters appealing to their connections to join political events) were most likely to actually participate out of the entire pool.¹³¹ Social media appears to modify how this type of political network functions. A clear example of this is in how McAdam describes the process of a new participant attending a political rally. By attending a rally, the budding activist will, one, meet more activists thereby expanding his network of recruiting appeals; two, by talking to others at the rally and listening to the speakers the activist may develop a better and more sympathetic understanding of the cause; and three, the behavioral norms of the rally may encourage the recruit to "play at" being an activist for the duration of the event.¹³² This process

¹²⁹ Gladwell, "Small Change"

¹³⁰ McAdam, "Recruitment to High-Risk Activism" 68

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., 69

builds on itself, as McAdam argues, “each succeeding foray into safe forms of activism increases the recruit's network integration, ideological affinity with the movement, and commitment to an activist identity, as well as his receptivity to more costly forms of participation.”¹³³

On the Internet and with the constant presence of social media, this process moves to wherever and whenever a potential activist chooses to engage with it. As evidenced by the strong rhetoric on Tea Party and Occupy websites alike, there is no shortage of partisan material available at any time to influence an interested potential participant. Indeed, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are replete with a constant flow of political material across most individuals' experiences. A Pew Internet Research study found that 38% of those who use social networking sites or Twitter use them “to “like” or promote material related to politics or social issues that others have posted,”¹³⁴ 34% have used those platforms to post their thoughts and comments on political issues, 31% have used the platforms as tools to encourage others to take action on political and social issues important to the poster, and 21% belong to a group on those platforms that is involved in political or social issues, or is for a cause.¹³⁵

Therefore it is clear that the process of playing at being an activist can begin to take place at home, at work, or at any other time, and is no longer relegated to physically attending a rally by any means, as McAdam originally argued. In those terms, people who share a core set of certain beliefs, such as feeling unrepresented in party politics or feel that the economic system is working against their interests, craft that into a strong sense of shared identity with other activists who believe similarly. McAdam states that “[i]t is this type of gradual recruitment process that is likely to foster high-risk/cost activism.”¹³⁶ As individuals who find they are interested in

¹³³ Ibid., 70

¹³⁴ Rainie et al., “Social Media and Political Engagement”

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ McAdam, “Recruitment to High-Risk Activism” 70

participation reinforce their developing beliefs with repeated low-risk/low-cost engagement through social media, they are more willing to make stronger connections with their political network, sidestepping the obstacle of only weak connections suggested by Gladwell.

It is clear through demographic studies of both the Tea Party and Occupy that access to social media and having the leisure time to consume it for political purposes seems most prevalent in more affluent, white, highly-educated families. As elaborated by the demographics interpretation in the previous chapter, Tea Party supporters were more likely to be white, male, hold a college or higher degree, and occupy a higher income bracket than average. Occupy supporters were predominantly white, likely to hold a college degree, and in the case of Occupy Wall Street more likely to have a higher household income than the average New Yorker. It is no great stretch of the imagination to surmise why this trend would persist across social media-driven movements: individuals in a higher income bracket are more likely to have access to luxury products and services (smartphones, unmetered high-speed Internet, etc.) that provide convenient and constant access to social media platforms. Furthermore, holding college degrees and occupying a higher income bracket suggest that those individuals have more free time that they may choose to spend perusing social media, as well as the option to devote time toward engaging with issues that might not have a clear or direct causal impact on their day-to-day subsistence. This is supported by a 2012 Pew Internet Research study that states “even as the impact of income on political participation is more modest in the context of social networking sites, socio-economic distinctions related to education still play a prominent role in these spaces.”¹³⁷ The demographics of the most avid users of social media shape the sorts of participation social media can spur, which movements gain significance through the medium,

¹³⁷ Smith, Aaron. "Civic Engagement in the Digital Age."

and on the reciprocal side the political identities of those most politically engaged with social media.

Of course this is not a perfectly linear process. The influence of social media on this identity-forming process can either encourage real-world participation, or it can take the place of it. Some participants will find that their interest or ability to act only extends to these low-risk/low-cost forms of online participation, and will avoid increasingly high-risk/high-cost participation. Others may be misled by the amount of low-cost online participation they can produce, and feel that the impact of sharing many political articles and “liking” relevant statuses has a disproportionately greater influence than does their organizing rallies, attending meetings, or otherwise increasing their own cost of participation. As established before, the biographical availability of the potential activist is a major determining factor in which way this goes when social media is the primary driving force. It is the interplay of cases such as these with the enhanced ability of social media to create new activists that leads to many of the ambiguities and arguments surrounding social media's effect on political participation.

Lasting Effects of an Emergent Medium

Does social media as an emergent form of information dissemination and communication create new forms of movement and political institutions that are potent, replicable, and sustainable? Social media is not a one-size-fits-all path toward engendering a successful political movement. By some metrics of success, the Tea Party was a more successful movement than was Occupy. The Tea Party managed to get a number of its candidates into office, endorsing 80 candidates in the 2014 election, of which 58 won their races.¹³⁸ Yet in terms of

¹³⁸ Burghart, Devin. "Tea Party Endorsed Candidates Dominate Election 2014."

effecting change on American politics, the Tea Party has remained a fringe movement, both in numbers and national impact.¹³⁹ In contrast, the Occupy movement has been criticized for its lack of legislative impact¹⁴⁰ and lack of vitality after the Zuccotti Park encampments were dispersed. Yet both movements did have a lasting effect, if not for the reasons above. The narrative of each movement made a change to the terms of normative political discussion in America, on which point they seem to have had more success than they are generally credited. Both Democratic (Obama in his 2012 campaign included)¹⁴¹ and Republican candidates¹⁴² co-opted aspects of Occupy and Tea Party rhetoric, and successfully ran on platforms that drew some of their momentum from the social movements. Even if party politics taking some of the messages of the movements may have diminished their self-imposed distance from mainstream parties, doing so still imparted legitimacy onto the messages of the movements, and ensured that the change in normative discussion would stay even if the movements themselves dissipated. There is also an element of convenience in being able to cite recognizable slogans and popular messages of social movements, once those ideas have been distilled down and accepted by conventional political mediums. An article by *The Week* magazine aptly summarizes the notion: “Chanting “we are the 99 percent” is certainly more convenient than sharing a lecture by leftist economist and Occupy Wall Street supporter Joseph Stiglitz.”¹⁴³

As is compellingly shown in the cases of Occupy and the Tea Party movements, social media successfully spurring political participation requires a case where potential participants feel united by a shared identity and are biographically available to convert their accrued online

¹³⁹ Murray, Mark. "The Tea Party, four years later."

¹⁴⁰ Cillizza, Chris. "What Occupy Wall Street meant (or didn't) to politics."

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Williamson, Vanessa, Theda Skocpol, and John Coggin. "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism."

¹⁴³ Wagstaff, Keith. "Two years later: Did Occupy Wall Street make a difference?"

presence into action. McAdam argues that “attitudinal affinity and biographical availability must be considered necessary but not sufficient causes of participation in high-risk/high-cost activism.”¹⁴⁴ The cases examined in this research suggest otherwise – that, in fact, biographical availability may be a stronger indicator of participation through social media than traditional strong-tie connections.

The potency and replicability of social media-based political movements appears to be clearly established. Both the case studies examined here, as well as other international cases such as the Arab Spring, have made a clear and sharp impact on contemporary politics, and led to changes in electoral politics as well as normative discussions. These types of movements are certainly replicable so long as there are political issues which are able to harness politics that are biographically available, united by a perceived identity, and have access to social media technology. Whether these movements are sustainable remains an open question. Though powerful, both the Tea Party and Occupy movements have died down significantly in the time since their inception, and the long-term implications of each remain to be seen.

¹⁴⁴ McAdam, "Recruitment to High-Risk Activism" 87

Conclusion: Looking Ahead, Discursive Movements

Social media has changed both the nature of political participation and the logistics of political organization, but the degree to which it has done so varies based on the movement. In the least exciting sense, it is the latest and most efficient communications technology that Gladwell argues it to be, but the cases in this research show that it goes beyond being merely that. As the Occupy movement demonstrates, social media and its users can compellingly dictate the narrative structure of a social movement through the medium, which influences the actors and events that take place in real-world participation.

The demographics of the individuals led to participation in these movements reflects the evolution in political networks that has come about as a result of social media. Put in the terms used by McAdam, biographical availability plays a clear and defining role in shaping political networks through social media. All demographic studies showed a clear trend toward participation and support from groups in which white, affluent, college-educated, often male, individuals are overrepresented. These groups—privileged in America by race, economic standing, education, and to some extent sex—had greater access to often expensive social media technologies, and the free time to engage with it more readily. Furthermore, groups of underemployed workers, students, and retirees were overrepresented, many of whom have fewer economic and familial obligations to dissuade them from active participation.

McAdam suggested that individuals who held strong-tie connections in social movements would be more likely to be convinced by their acquaintances to begin participating in those movements. In turn, attending rallies and meetings allowed individuals who were attitudinally receptive to “play at” being an activist for the course of the events, and develop the mindset

through low-cost participation which could in turn engender more high-cost/high-risk participation. The advent of social media has overhauled this process by taking the option of “playing at” activism through low-cost/low-risk participation to the homes and personal electronics of individuals with access to these technologies. This change can have both positive and negative effects on real-world participation, and accounts for the ambiguities of some movements having a strong online presence, but failing to show real-world momentum. Some online participants will find their interest and willingness to put themselves at risk for a cause or movement only extends to the low-cost online activism with which they started, and not progress to real-world action. Others will mistake repeated low-cost online participation for sharing an equivalent impact with high-risk/high-cost real-world participation: it takes much more than good communication and spreading awareness of an issue to effect change in the world, particularly when that change goes against established and institutionalized political norms.

As both cases demonstrate, the vastly increased scale on which social media allows social movements to operate has enabled decentralized, mostly horizontally-organized social movements to challenge economic and social normative issues as well as global actors and institutions that previously these sorts of movements did not have the tools to effectively confront. Yet both the Tea Party and Occupy movements did not end up delivering the strong change they protested for: income inequality is still on the rise half a decade later, and elected Tea Party candidates have not overhauled the nation's legislation. The greatest impact the movements had was on changing the normative conversation. Both Democratic and Republican candidates co-opted elements of Occupy and Tea Party rhetoric, which diffused some momentum of the movements. Yet by co-opting this rhetoric into party politics, the candidates who

integrated it ensured that that rhetoric would stay alive and become a legitimate part of the discourse in American politics.

These outcomes suggest the growing popularity of a new form, albeit not the only form, of political social movement on the horizon: discursive movements that focus more on creating a change in narrative direction than on achieving quantitative goals of legislation or election. Whether this is a positive and effective change remains to be seen. The potency of social media to empower new social movements cannot be understated, but empowerment is no guarantee of quality. And, indeed, not all movements so empowered by social media are necessarily positive, long-lasting, or a welcome direction in political action. It is vital therefore to not conflate the content of the movement with the mechanisms of social media that allowed it to grow. Instead, view social media as its function: a tool that can be harnessed to ultimately construct change in ways that are new and creative. But tools are not the finished products; they need thoughtful wielders, and social media needs movements and activists that grow beyond its own apparatus.

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