Digital communication technologies and the Occupy movement

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Obtaining a British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship was a startling piece of good fortune. Upon learning the outcome of my application, I spent the next few weeks in a daze, thinking feverishly about the research I was going to conduct, the books I was going to read, and the people I was going to meet. My application outlined an ambitious project that would take me to different locations across the USA, to carry out fieldwork and visit universities with an expertise in my topic, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Washington and New York University.

The title of my project was 'Digital Communications Technologies and Protest Movements: the Case of Occupy', and its aim was to explore the relationship between the internet and new forms of protest. My focus was on the Occupy movement in the UK and the USA, itself a part of the 2011 protest wave that started with the Arab spring in January of that year, then spread to Spain and Greece in May with the Indignados movement, and arrived in the USA in September 2011. Occupy activists protested against global inequality and the exploitation of the 99 per cent by the 1 per cent, a slogan that became one of the most enduring outcomes of the movement. The main tactic employed by Occupy was the setting up of camps in central urban locations. The camps operated as laboratories of democracy, as spaces where people could vent their indignation, hold political discussions and take decisions in an inclusive manner through consensus. Occupiers had a strong belief in non-hierarchical methods of organising and were averse to central leadership, viewing the movement as 'leaderful' rather than 'leaderless'.

Application

In my application, I proposed to investigate the role of digital media technologies – such as social media platforms, wiki and mobile applications, and discussion lists – in processes of organising, mobilising and decision-making. I was also going to examine the activists' relationship with the media, and their attempts to build solidarity and construct a cohesive collective identity. Although at the time of my application, in September 2012, the physical occupations had been evicted, activist networks associated with or emerging from Occupy were involved in various campaigns around the impact of the economic crisis, or even in humanitarian relief like 'Occupy Sandy' – the network put together by Occupy activists to help the relief effort when hurricane Sandy hit New York in the autumn of 2012.

Having the time to concentrate on research for a whole year, without any distractions from teaching or other tasks, was a gift that few of us are bestowed with in academia. When I applied for a Mid-Career Fellowship in September 2012 – a bit more than five years after I obtained my PhD – the thought that I was already in the middle of my career felt strange. Yet, looking back, it's clear to me that I was plagued by some common difficulties faced by scholars entering the 'middle period' of their career. This is a time when articles emerging from the PhD thesis have been submitted and published, when new research may have started but is not yet consolidated, and when teaching and administrative duties leave little time for research and study. This is compounded by the worsening conditions within UK universities where budgets are cut, research in the humanities and social sciences is underfunded and where a culture of overwork seems to reign. During the darkest moments, questions begin to arise about whether academia is still the right career path. Against this backdrop, the British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship provided me with much needed time for reading and reflection.

Frameworks

'O25 Occupy Oakland, Oscar Grant Plaza.' Photo taken by Steve Rhodes on 25 October 2012. (CC-BY-NC-ND licence.)

First of all, this allowed me to develop the theoretical framework underpinning my research. The key thread that underlies my work relates to the ways in which people create collectives through communication, and the role of digital media practices in this process. This became a popular topic of academic research around the 2000s – particularly after the emergence of the Global Justice Movement during the Seattle protests in late 1999, when activists managed to stop the meeting of the World Trade Organization. The Seattle mobilisation was followed by demonstrations during the major summits of international organisations and meetings of the G8 or the World Economic Forum. Activists also set up their own spaces of encounter, such as the World Social Forum which took place for the first time in Porto Allegre in 2001. Academic and journalistic writings at the time noted that the Global Justice Movement was organised as a 'network of networks', a structure that was similar to the 'network of networks' architecture of the web. This gave rise to debates around the potential of the internet to shape the characteristics of social movements, such as their scale, organising structure and collective narratives – debates that continue to rage nowadays as evidenced, for instance, in the fierce discussion around Facebook or Twitter 'revolutions'.

However, the field is still missing concrete theoretical frameworks that can help us understand how the media can influence the character of collectives. Academic research focuses instead on the opposite question – on how the strategies and characteristics of collectives shape their use of the media. Once we reverse this arrow of influence and attempt to analyse how social movements and the media mutually constitute each other, then we run into difficulties. There is also little historical research that can aid us in this inquiry. For example, the ways in which the use of telephone trees may have influenced the organisation of the civil rights movement are never addressed in writings on the topic. I would argue that it is with the rise of the internet that the crucial role of the media in the internal communication of social movements was brought more clearly to the fore and became a research issue.

Responding to the need for more theoretical work in this area, this last decade has seen a wealth of creativity in the development of theory around the media and collective action. This is an interdisciplinary field of enquiry, spanning predominantly the disciplines of sociology, politics, and media or communication studies.[1] The framework that I'm currently developing is situated within this new wave of theorising. I combine insights from social movement theory, organisational communication and media theory, to investigate collective action as a phenomenon emerging in communication, in the conversations among activists, both mediated and unmediated, and in the ways these are codified in 'texts' of various kinds. However, I consider texts and conversations in broader terms, with 'conversation' connoting 'social interaction', while 'texts' can include any stable patterning of ideas that arises from but also underlies social interaction – such as rules, laws and codes of conduct, or even computer software and architectural design. Although it is still work in progress, this conceptualisation has allowed me to place

1. New frameworks emerging in the field include, for instance, the logic of 'connective action' by W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, who argue that the use of digital media is facilitating a new 'ideal type' of mobilisation, which is based more on organising by individuals and the circulation of personal frames and stories; they contrast this form of organising to more conventional forms of collective action, which are co-ordinated from the top down by established organisations that utilise collective frames and ideologies: W.L. Bennett and A. Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective action: Digital media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Other academic theories attempt to understand digital media as part of the broader communication repertoire that movements have at their disposal. For example, Emiliano Treré and Alice Mattoni employ theories of mediation and mediatisation to capture the long term effects of 'media logic' and media practices on social movements: A. Mattoni and E. Treré, 'Media Practices, Mediation Processes, and Mediatization in the Study of Social Movements', *Communication Theory*, 24:3 (2014), 252–271 (doi:10.1111/comt.12038). Sasha Costanza-Chock has introduced the term 'transmedia organizing' to signify the ways in which movement activists co-create narratives and opportunities for participation across multiple media platforms: S. Costanza-Chock, *Out of the Shadows, Into the Streets! Transmedia Organizing and the Immigrant Rights Movement* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2014).

communication at the centre of social movement activity and to understand how the activists' communication practices contribute to building the collective.

Interviews

Methodologically, my project is based on in-depth interviews with Occupy activists. This helped me to examine the role of digital media within the broader communication ecology of the movement, and to capture media practices that span different communication spaces. For instance, when asked about their use of social media, interviewees often compare it with their experience of face-to-face meetings, thus offering useful insights in how these types of communication complement each other. At the same time, interviews can provide a glimpse into people's attitudes towards technology, and the ways in which these shape and are shaped by their political strategies and ideologies. The methods currently dominating the new wave of research on social media and activism, namely large scale social network or content analysis of tweets, are unable to offer these insights. While they successfully provide an overview of the content produced by activists and of how information circulates, they fail to show what lies behind the production of information – the practices, values and challenges faced by the people generating this social media material. Yet some analysis of this content is necessary in order to gain a sense of the stories and narratives that are shared on these platforms. In this respect, my interviews provided useful pointers for selecting the most important material out of the millions of tweets and hundreds of Facebook pages, blogs and websites created by the movement. Otherwise, the volume of online content generated by Occupy proves too dizzying and overwhelming for a single researcher to analyse.

I interviewed 75 activists in total. More than half were involved in Occupy Wall Street, but my sample also included activists from London, Seattle, Boston and Sacramento. I selected my interviewees using a snowball method, starting with a few contacts in each city who then introduced me to others in their network. I focused on activists who were part of the media, press and tech working groups, as well as participants involved in the facilitation of meetings and in live-streaming. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted between 45 minutes and three hours. I had initially planned for fewer interviews. By the time I officially started my fieldwork in September 2013, the Occupy movement was active mainly on social media, employing the various accounts established in its heyday to raise awareness and mobilise participation for a variety of causes – from home foreclosures and student debt, to fracking and the minimum wage. Managing to find such a high number of Occupy activists who were willing to be interviewed was a result of relentless networking and good fortune. I caught many activists at a time when they were ready to reflect on their experiences and eager to have these reflections recorded as part of the history of the movement.

The interviewing process was both enjoyable and profoundly moving. It unearthed many personal stories about people's involvement in Occupy, their hopes and disappointments, their enduring commitment to a common cause, the friends and knowledge that they gained, the time and patience that they lost. For many of my interviewees, Occupy was a turning point of some sort, regardless of whether they were already experienced activists. For the novices in politics, participating in an open assembly was an eye-opener, one of the first instances when they felt part of something larger. For some of the more experienced ones, Occupy re-engaged them in politics, raising their hopes that the struggles they've been fighting for may enjoy more popular support than they originally thought.

Academic contacts

My interviews in Seattle, New York, and Boston took place during my research visits in universities located in these cities: the University of Washington, New York University, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This provided me with an 'academic home' during my stay in the USA, and allowed me to gain an insight into the research conducted in these institutions. Getting to know other academic contexts was particularly useful for someone like me who's been affiliated with the same university since the start of my PhD research at the University of Westminster in 2002. It was also very helpful for exchanging ideas and establishing relationships with experts in my field, such as W. Lance Bennett and Amoshaun Toft at the University of Washington and Sasha Costanza-Chock at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. These visits may also lead to closer collaborations in the future. For instance, together with colleagues at the University of Washington, we are currently trying to obtain funding for a joint project on the outcomes of Occupy in the USA and the UK.

But this exchange of ideas was also facilitated through the talks that I gave on my research, where I presented both the theoretical framework and preliminary results of the study. Since September 2013, I have been invited to talk at Lund University in Sweden, as well as at the University of Washington, Columbia University, the University of Michigan, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston University, the University of East Anglia, the University of Westminster, and the University of Brighton. I have also presented this work at the conferences of the European Consortium for Political Research and the International Communication Association, as well as at activist meetings.

Findings

I am currently in the process of finishing the analysis of my fieldwork and of writing up the remaining articles and a monograph on the topic. My tentative findings show that digital media increased the movement's outreach, and contributed to dynamics of

On 12 May 2015, Dr Anastasia Kavada participated in an event at the British Academy that showcased the work of academics who had been supported through Academy funding.

dispersion and decentralisation. At the same time, the physical occupations provided activists with a focal point where they could take decisions as a group and develop stronger bonds. I argue that it was the balance between these opposing dynamics of centralisation and decentralisation that shaped both the emergence of the movement and its decline, particularly after the physical occupations were forcefully evicted. Other findings refer to the relationships of power within the movement and the role of communication practices in the formation of hidden hierarchies. The study has also identified the tensions and debates around the use of proprietary social media platforms such as Facebook, the efforts to build a collective voice, as well as the problems of digital surveillance.

It is worth noting that this balance between online and offline participation and the effort to build a collective across different media is a point of interest not only within the activist community, but also in parliamentary politics. For instance, using insights from this project I was able to advise the 'Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy' in a workshop organised at the Houses of Parliament in May 2014.

The findings arising from this study have also informed my teaching, particularly in the newly launched MA course in Media, Campaigning and Social Change, which I am leading together with my colleague Michaela O'Brien. Teaching on the new MA has left little time for writing since September 2014, but the first article emerging from this research will be published in August 2015.[2]

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So in the end, I didn't manage to interview all of the people I wanted to interview, to read all of the books I wanted to read, or to visit all of the places I wanted to visit. But the benefits of this award have surpassed my expectations. The Fellowship has allowed me to concentrate on research, to generate a wealth of qualitative material, and to reflect on the broader theoretical issues informing my field. It has also renewed my commitment to social change, one of the prime motivations that underlines my academic research and sustains my passion and strength in difficult times. The British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship has finally given me the confidence and placed me in the right frame of mind to advance my academic career. It was a time when suddenly, and joyfully, different aspects of my professional life started to click together – my teaching, my research, my theoretical outlook, as well as my approach to politics, work and life in general. Taking a break and focusing on a project that engages you can have these astounding results. And of course I owe it all to the British Academy for presenting me with this life-changing opportunity.

2. A. Kavada, 'Creating the collective: social media, the Occupy Movement and its constitution as a collective actor', *Information, Communication & Society* (forthcoming, August 2015).