

## Relations of Media Production in Occupy Wall Street

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Occupy Wall Street raised a protest against economic inequality and the power of financial institutions. It produced a profusion of media in print, graphics, video, social media, and live streams, which constituted a media ecosystem, encompassing media practices, technologies, and relations among producers. I argue, first, that Occupy's media challenged the distortions and omissions of the mainstream media. Second, the works ranged from low-tech (face-to-face oral communication) through traditional (print) to high-tech (digital) media. The digital media were used not as a substitute for live action, however, but to mobilize people for low-tech, face-to-face encounters and demonstrations. Third, occupiers were available because they were young, educated, and savvy in the new media, in which many were aspiring professionals facing difficult career prospects. Finally, media producers adopted a cooperative, nonhierarchical working style, promoting ideals of nonalienated labor.

*Keywords: Occupy Wall Street, old/new technologies, media ecosystem, nonalienated labor*

On September 17, 2011, a small group of protesters occupied Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan. As Occupy Wall Street, they raised their protest against economic inequality and the power of financial institutions. They inspired hundreds of spinoffs occupying public spaces in cities and towns around the United States. Planning on extended stays, these occupations became living communities. And they produced an outpouring of symbolic representations in various media, demonstrating enormous creative energy.

In this article, I examine the media of Occupy Wall Street (OWS), especially what was produced by the occupiers of Zuccotti Park in New York, the center of the U.S. media industry. Occupiers created expressions of their political platform of opposition to social and economic inequality and to the mainstream media in a variety of forms, ranging from low-tech (direct oral communication) through

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medium-tech (print and graphics) to high-tech (digital) media: newspapers and pamphlets, posters and art works, pronouncements on social media, live-streamed reportage, and much more. Through these media, they proclaimed an Occupy culture. The different forms, moreover, were not independent, but interacted with and reinforced each other.

Here, I make a fourfold argument. First, Occupy's media challenged what the protesters saw as the distortions and omissions of the mainstream media about both the movement itself and the issues it raised. Second, new digital media played a prominent role, but they were mainly used to bring occupiers to the streets for face-to-face encounters and demonstrations. Third, occupiers were young, educated, and savvy in the new media, but they faced a difficult job market. The Occupy movement resonated with their values, and their youth and precarious employment status made them available for mobilization. Fourth, they produced their works in collaborative groups with cooperative, nonhierarchical working relations, embodying ideals of nonalienated labor.

The media that Occupy produced and the social relations among the producers constituted a media ecosystem. A *media ecosystem* is a system of people, practices, values, and technologies in a particular local environment in which multiple media are produced. For this definition, I draw on several related concepts found in the literature on media and social movements: media ecosystem (Lopez, 2012), media ecology (Treré, 2012; Treré & Mattoni, 2016), information ecology (Nardi & O'Day, 1999), and pervasive communication environment (Coopman, 2009).

These concepts draw attention to the existence of and relations among multiple media in the same environment and to their relation to the historical and social context, recognizing that media are distinguished not only by technology, but also by the social relations and meanings embodied in them. The authors seek to avoid technological determinism and the "one-medium bias." The media production of Occupy Wall Street can be considered a media ecosystem because the media were diverse, showing great variety both in form and in technological complexity ("high" versus "low") and rooted in a particular place and time.

I choose the term *media ecosystem* for two reasons: First, I prefer *ecosystem* to *ecology* because it has a more precise referent. With it I emphasize that it is located in a specific place and time: The course of the movement and its reflection in media production were affected by its location in New York, the center of the U.S.'s financial and media industries, in the early 21st century. Second, I refer to the media production of OWS in a broader sense than is conveyed by *information ecology*: The media of OWS included both informational and creative media, exhibiting an exuberant creativity in form, content, and process. This article shows not only that a diversity of media arose and interacted with each other within the Occupy movement, but also that although they were distinctly characterized by one or another technology, the high-tech, digital media did not dominate, but were put at the service of more conventional forms of communication. Media practices and products within the ecosystem, moreover, were influenced by changes occurring in the larger media ecosystem of the arts and information industries in the United States as a whole.

The research reported here is based on participant observation and in-depth interviews. I was a peripheral participant in Occupy Wall Street. I hung out periodically in Zuccotti Park, joined in several marches, and shared in the exuberant, carnival-like spirit. After the occupation, from 2012 to 2014, I participated in the Tweetboat (described below) that maintained the @OccupyWallStNYC Twitter account. I conducted 20 semistructured interviews with occupiers who participated in the production of the various media. Respondents were selected by a snowball procedure. With their permission, I quote most of the interview respondents by name; mostly young, raised during the Internet age, they are less concerned with privacy than with expressing themselves, and many have written, given interviews, or produced videos that are publicly available. Only by identifying them can I relate what they said to me to their public statements.

### **Occupying Wall Street**

The occupiers were inspired by occupations in the Arab world, Wisconsin, Spain, and Greece in 2011. In these protests, demonstrators, often summoned by social networking media, filled an outdoor public space (except in Wisconsin, where they occupied the state capitol) to press their demands. Wall Street was heavily guarded on September 17, so protesters occupied nearby Zuccotti Park.<sup>2</sup> They condemned the huge wealth of the superrich, increasing since the 1970s. They also protested the disparity of political power, lax campaign financing rules, and the multibillion-dollar bank bailout in 2008–2009. With the slogan “We are the 99 percent” they hoped to unite the great majority of the population in opposition to concentrated wealth.

Although the movement eschewed formal ideology, it bore an anarchist sensibility, focused not on smashing the state but on creating alternative institutions of mutuality and horizontal governance within the present society (Hammond, 2015a). The occupation inspired hundreds more occupations, large and small, in cities and towns around the country. The round-the-clock presence made each one a space for living, promoting intense interaction and organization for a variety of tasks, some focused on the community at the site itself, some directed to the outside world in political mobilization and in media of communication. Occupiers attempted to practice what they called “prefiguration,” anticipating in their egalitarian interaction the institutions of an unalienated future society.

After two months, police invaded the site without warning after midnight on November 15 and dragged the protesters out. Before or soon after, most of the occupations around the country were also evicted. The movement then lost most of its steam, and in the mind of much of the public, it was over. Many initiatives continued, however, including production of ephemeral or more permanent media products by groups that had come together during the occupation. (Many of the media projects described in this article continued, although generally with diminishing intensity.)

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<sup>2</sup> General accounts of Occupy Wall Street can be found in Gitlin (2012), Gould-Wartofsky (2015), Graeber (2013), and Hammond (2015b).

### **Media Production in Occupy Wall Street**

The U.S. left has had a tradition of opposition media for decades. Many political activists believe that the mainstream media are biased and closed to them, hampered by economic, political, and journalistic constraints. In their view, dissenting positions are marginalized, especially challenges to existing power structures (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Gitlin, 1980; Ryan, 1991). Although protesters frequently exaggerate their exclusion, they create their own media to counter these distortions and omissions, called "alternative media" or "radical media," mainly in print publications and radio—and more recently in websites, online videos, and social media. Alternative or radical media offer counterhegemonic political views, adopt nonhierarchical work relations, and include otherwise excluded voices (Atton, 2003; Downing, 2001; Mattoni, Berdnikovs, Ardizzoni, & Cox, 2010).

The antiestablishment orientation produces both specifically political and cultural messages; these media challenge government policies, but they also reject the commodification of everyday life and attempt to embody egalitarian social relations in their production practices. Furthermore, they want to open their pages and airwaves to voices that are normally excluded. They aim to break down the distinctions among producers, subjects, and audience.

The U.S. media ecology had changed rapidly in the two decades before OWS, with e-mail, then with the Internet and social media, and later with live streaming (aided by the smartphone as an Internet device). In part because of the emergence of these new media, the industry faced a crisis, with declining profits for traditional media. While new media themselves struggled to find profitable business models, they offered new opportunities for social movements to present alternative views. They facilitated and reinforced Occupy's democratic, free-for-all ethos. The timing and rapid spread of the movement in turn were propitious for innovations in movement-generated media.

Occupy Wall Street not only rode the wave of the new media, but also helped to pull it forward with a proliferation of expressions emanating from the many occupations. Through YouTube, Facebook, blogs, and crowdsourcing, activists communicated with each other locally and over vast distances. Unlike the mainstream media, the new media allowed decommodification: They were free: free of cost, available to everyone without restriction, and open to input from everyone. They were interactive, "many-to-many," offering the reader or viewer the opportunity to respond, often generating extensive, multiparty conversations (Juris, 2012; Tufekci, 2017). To the user, the new media appeared to be democratic, participatory, leaderless, and not beholden to large institutions or economic interests.<sup>3</sup> Openness makes

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<sup>3</sup> Although it was not so clear at the time of OWS, these media have themselves become major capitalist corporations. Already by 2011, they rivaled and today in many cases exceed the financial and informative power of the legacy media. In 2018, Alphabet/Google (which owns YouTube) was the third largest U.S. corporation in market capitalization, and Facebook (which also owns Instagram) was the fifth. The social media providers still offer free access for most users, given that their profitability depends on the size of the audience they can deliver to advertisers, but they have been the targets of severe criticisms on many grounds: that they violate users' privacy, exercise monopoly power, convey misinformation, provide

for uneven quality, but it allows a marvelous creativity. The occupation called forth a polyphonic (or cacophonous) outburst of originality and experimentation.

Most of the attention to media use in OWS, as in the contemporaneous movements around the world, has been directed at the digital media, especially social networks. I show, however, that production in more traditional media was equally impressive, and that the social networks were not used independently of those traditional forms or of live action. In the media ecosystem, digital media were deployed largely to communicate information about the movement's activities in real time and real space and to mobilize active participation. The new media were instruments to encourage face-to-face activism as much as an end in themselves.

### **Occupy's Communicative Genres**

Occupiers produced media in a variety of informational and creative genres with various levels of technological complexity. They created this profusion of media not only because they wanted to spread their message, which they thought usually went unheard, but also to satisfy a general craving to express themselves. In the occupation, they were free of daily, routine demands, and Zuccotti Park was a hothouse of expression, both in constant conversations and in media projects in which anyone could join. People took up instruments of communication—keyboard, brush, camera—and poured out texts and images.

In an ecosystem, a species consists of the organisms that perform similar functions, and different species interact with each other. We can think of a species in the OWS media ecosystem as a group of people who practiced a particular genre. The analogy is not precise because many people took on multiple roles and there were some genres (face-to-face communication, social media) in which almost everyone participated.

### ***Face-to-Face***

The most important medium of communication was actually unmediated, that is, people talking to each other. (Is it oxymoronic to call this a medium of communication?) Virtual mobilization through the new digital media gave OWS much of its uniqueness, but it was as important that the Occupy movement restored live interaction to political activism. For the preceding decade, much "activism" had been limited to sending e-mails and signing online petitions, what Evgeny Morozov (2011) calls "slacktivism" (pp. 189–191; cf. Mattoni et al., 2010, p. 12). Click a mouse, sign a petition; you have done your duty.

Occupy, in striking contrast, called on people to do more than respond passively and reflexively, and digital media were used to promote real-time actions. On the sites (not the websites but the physical locations), people milled about, peddled their causes, talked and debated in informal groups and somewhat more formal working groups. They met in a daily general assembly to make collective

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channels for illegitimate political meddling, and have repeatedly lied to the public and to authorities about their misdeeds.

decisions. At any occupation, there were constant and intense conversations about political issues, personal troubles, the structure of the economy and the polity, and the future. Groups formed and dissolved as people switched back and forth from the concrete tasks that kept the occupation going to deliberation and debate. For occupiers and others who just dropped in, the conversations reinforced the sense of equality and joint ownership. Having a place for interaction was what made the occupation of a physical space so important.

Meetings were frequent (some would say endless) sites for oral communication, facilitated by the most innovative medium enlisted to support face-to-face communication: the "people's microphone." Using bullhorns in public in New York requires a police permit, so occupiers found an alternative: A speaker at a mass meeting paused after each phrase and the people near the speaker repeated it in unison to the crowd; if the crowd was big, a second circle of shouters repeated it. If it was even bigger than that, people on the periphery listened on their phones and shouted it to the crowd. Although use of the people's mic dates back at least to the antinuclear protests of the 1980s, Occupy made it a medium of choice for protest movements (Kahn, 2011).

The people's mic was also used to attract attention at an occupation site. Someone who wished to make an announcement, or just sound off, would shout out, "mic check!" Those nearby repeated "mic check!" in unison. The speaker shouted "mic check!" a second time and, if all went well, a larger group, now paying attention, repeated it. The speaker then went on to make the announcement, broken up into short bits that could be repeated by the crowd.

The people's mic affords a sense of power: The repetition gives a speaker the feeling of really being listened to (cf. Costanza-Chock, 2012, p. 381; Kim, 2011; Reguillo, 2012). And for those playing the role of the mic, the call and response are physically energizing and provide a strong sense of participation. Although initially adopted in resistance to regulations that would silence them, it became a source of joy: Sometimes it was practiced by a group so small that it was hardly needed. As Nathan Jurgenson (2011) points out, the rejection of technological fixes is a symbolic act with political meaning: an implicit critique of consumerism and capitalist globalization.

There were other low-tech procedures to reach decisions in face-to-face gatherings. Meetings had no chairperson, but a "facilitator" (or, usually, two facilitators). A "stack" kept track of people who raised their hands to be recognized, usually a "progressive stack," giving priority to members of traditionally marginalized groups. Meetings to reach consensus were often long. Hand signals were used to speed meetings along by registering agreement and disagreement without formal votes. But the process became unwieldy; it did more to create solidarity than to facilitate the taking of decisions.

Another low-tech, participatory medium of communication was the handwritten sign. At demonstrations in recent years, sponsoring organizations (or competing sponsoring organizations) have usually printed signs for their supporters to carry. Each group's signs are uniform in appearance and carry approved slogans. At Occupy demonstrations, marchers carried their own signs, proclaiming each individual's sentiments. Many of them showed a self-reflexive humor: for example, "I'm so angry I made a sign" (many can be seen at <http://www.damncoolpictures.com/2011/10/best-signs-from-occupy-wall->

street.html). With their signs, occupiers showed a welcome light touch, very different from the atmosphere created by institutional, printed signs. Their use testified to the leaderless, anti-institutional ethos of the Occupy movement: The creators bowed to no hierarchical organization.

### ***The Printed Word***

If the most interesting medium of communication was at the lowest level of technology (the human voice, amplified only by repetition by other human voices), occupiers were also masters of the new media and avid producers and consumers of the old. Occupation sites and subgroups within them produced many print publications. The *Occupied Wall Street Journal*, an attractively produced broadsheet, published several issues in New York, with contributions by movement journalists and such luminaries as Cornel West and Barbara Kingsolver.<sup>4</sup> *Occupy! An OWS-Inspired Gazette* published longer articles mostly by occupiers, some analytical and others diary-like, recounting the experiences of the occupation; many of them were reprinted in an anthology (Taylor & Gessen, 2012).<sup>5</sup> Occupations in other cities produced newspapers reporting their own events and targeting the local mainstream press.

Other groups produced general prose publications. Some appeared online and in print; some appeared only as blogs, continuously updated, usually by multiple contributors. The print magazine *Tidal* (subtitled *Occupy Theory/Occupy Strategy*) was founded during the occupation and continued to publish afterward. Occupy Comix produced graphic novels, later reprinted in a bound book (Moore, 2014).

### ***Arts***

There was an enormous outpouring of artistic production as well. Artists working with Occupy not only produced artworks. They called into question the economics and aesthetics of the formal art world in its capital, New York City, as serving the interest of the 1%. They challenged the practice of artistic production in the hierarchical, profit-oriented world of high art, seeking to demystify the formal art world's pretensions to high culture and the economic function of art as a certification of cultural capital and a store of investment capital.

Against it they counterposed a collaborative production process that welcomed participants, regardless of formal training or technical skill, and that would produce works that were meant to be

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<sup>4</sup> The late David Carr (2011), whose weekly column on the media business in *The New York Times* often agonized over the prospects for survival of print newspapers in the digital age, waxed ecstatic on seeing the *Occupied Wall Street Journal*.

<sup>5</sup> Both publications had ambiguous relations to the occupation; although perceived as being of, or belonging to, Occupy Wall Street, they established their distance. *Occupied Wall Street Journal* was editorially independent of the General Assembly and raised its own funds; the group that produced the *Gazette* was largely drawn from the staff of the magazine *N+1*, and the periodical presented itself as a product of *N+1* rather than of the occupation. Nevertheless, both were often taken as officially representing the occupation.

accessible (artistically as well as economically) to the broad public. The process was often more important than any product. Most showed little concern to collect or preserve their work.

Among those making art that was inexpensive and popular in concept was the screen-printing group at Zuccotti Park. According to Jesse Goldstein, cofounder of the group, screen printing has "a very low barrier to entry: a very easy technique. Once you have all the tools together, actually printing on somebody's clothing is simple. It is very well suited to public engagement: printing in public is very easy" (personal interview, March 13, 2013). Experienced printers and novices worked side by side, and printing became a full-time activity. The group silkscreened T-shirts and other surfaces with slogans of OWS. The screen printers' area became a tourist attraction, according to Goldstein: "something to do when you went to visit Zuccotti Park" (personal interview, March 13, 2013). Visitors provided their own T-shirts, and the printers charged nothing for their work.

The Arts and Culture working group, most of whose members were practicing or aspiring artists, was formed soon after the occupation. Several subgroups grew out of it that not only produced artworks conveying the message of Occupy, but also worked to demystify the world of high art as an elitist, capitalist enterprise, and expose and improve the working conditions of art workers. The Occupy Museums group "occupied" the Museum of Modern Art in January 2012, unfurled a large banner, and marched through the museum conducting a general assembly that moved from gallery to gallery. The group took up as a cause the art handlers at Sotheby's auction house, locked out of work for 10 months. The occupiers denounced the handlers' low salaries, especially in contrast to the multimillion-dollar auction prices for artworks (Pollack, 2012; Thrasher, 2012).

Posters that broadcast the message and the activities of occupations across the country came to be collected by Occuprint, the screen printers group. Its cofounders, invited by the *Occupied Wall Street Journal* to curate a special issue, put out a call. Artists from occupations around the country sent them original posters. The cocurators produced the issue and then posted the posters, of varying themes and quality, on a website ([www.occuprint.org](http://www.occuprint.org)). Occuprint did not select based on the style or quality of the offerings, according to Goldstein: "We were interested in letting people's self-expression define the visual aesthetic" (personal interview, March 13, 2013). Acknowledging the uneven artistic quality, he eschewed the use of the term *art* in favor of *images* that emanate from a "social movement culture." He said in an interview and an article that the posters' visual aesthetic was more positive than the political art of recent years, not "resigned to . . . gloomy prognoses" (Goldstein, 2012, p. 10).

Other groups of artists also declined to adopt a uniform artistic style; nevertheless, as with much political art, a clean line and bold figures predominated: visually striking images good for outdoor presentation and reproduction in photographs and on screens, rather than the kind of detail that calls for contemplative observation in a museum. As with other media production activities, the production of art was often a collaborative process that endeavored to break down the hierarchies that normally prevail in the art world.

The Arts and Labor group, which grew out of the Arts and Culture group, was especially concerned with the conditions of work in the art world. It produced art to accompany Occupy's marches



and other activities. Although the core members of the group were professional artists, they incorporated untrained artists on an equal basis. They showed surprisingly little concern for preserving their works: They were produced for a specific occasion and designed to be ephemeral. According to Patrick Conlon, "It is not the physical banner that matters but the message; once the message has been put out there, the banner doesn't matter" (personal interview, August 23, 2012).

The posters collected by Occuprint, however, had a different destiny. Occuprint selected 31 posters and prepared a portfolio with museum-quality printing that was offered for sale to museums and cultural institutions in 2013. It was acquired by the same Museum of Modern Art that the Arts and Culture group had occupied the previous year. The irony was not lost on Occupy's artists, but they did not all see it the same way. Molly Crabapple, whose work was included in the collection, said, "I'd way rather have it acquired by Moma than by Morgan Stanley and put in their lobby" (Holpuch, 2013); but Jim Johnson (2013), writing on the "(Notes on) Politics, Theory & Photography" blog, called it "very, very depressing news."

This was but one of the debates over the nature and political role of art that went on in Occupy. Most believed fiercely in the potential contribution of art to making a better world; others disparaged the value of art's contribution, while nevertheless pursuing it. They also debated what kinds of objects and images they should propagate: how to create objects that would convey a political message to the public, whether that message dictated a rejection of traditional forms or only of traditional art market relations, and how the contribution of participants without formal training should be valued—all of these questions were posed by the creation of a space in Zuccotti Park where a new kind of art could be envisioned (Cobb, 2013; Goldstein, 2012; Mason, 2012; McKee, 2016; Newton, 2013).

### ***Digital Media***

Occupations and occupiers created thousands of websites. Some were local to a specific occupation city. Some were informational, announcing events. Some were issue-specific within an occupation site, and others were issue-specific but attempted to cover a broader territory. Some were simply celebrations of the movement's spirit, in prose, poetry, and art. Some were used to raise funds: The New York City General Assembly received \$700,000 in donations funneled through a fiscal sponsor.

Occupy arose at a time when full-time career opportunities in the arts, communication, and information technology were disappearing and many young and well-educated aspiring practitioners were attracted to presumed opportunities in New York only to find themselves consigned to a growing "precariat" (Milkman, Lewis, & Luce, 2013). The Tumblr blog, "WE ARE THE 99 PERCENT" (<http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/>), went online before the occupation of Zuccotti Park, inviting people to post a photograph of themselves (in today's term, a selfie) holding a handwritten poster relating their economic difficulties. This blog spread the word—and the ideas—of the coming occupation.

In the first months' entries the most common concerns, in order, were student debt, children, health care, and jobs, expressing raw concern with economic survival, with little attention to organization or structural change. According to Mike Konczal (2011),

The 99% looks too beaten down to demand anything as grand as “fairness” in their distribution of the economy. There’s no calls for some sort of post-industrial personal fulfillment in their labor—very few even invoke the idea that a job should “mean something.” (para. 16)

The 99% blog invited sad stories and self-pity—rightly so from victims of the financial crisis. But it was uncharacteristic of Occupy’s media messages, most of which were upbeat, celebrating the opportunity for human connection and collective action with a lively sense of humor.

On the other hand, the theme of 99% was a powerful slogan, condensing into a single phrase the grievances that Occupy wanted to publicize and redress. Because journalists could use it to encapsulate the occupiers’ claim pithily, it migrated from the movement’s media to the mainstream. Fred Shapiro, the Yale law librarian, put “We are the 99 percent” in first place on his annual list of the 10 best quotes of 2011 (Christofferson, 2011).

### ***Social Networking Media***

Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking media came into their own in the half-decade before Occupy Wall Street. Many observers credited these media with overwhelming importance in drawing occupiers to the uprisings of 2011, in Egypt, Spain, the United States, and elsewhere, even calling them “Twitter revolutions.”

Occupy was “born digital” (Castells, 2015, p. 174). After the initial Adbusters call, Twitter and Facebook overflowed with its information and debates. Websites claiming to represent Occupy mushroomed: By November 2011, there were at least 400 Facebook pages with 2.7 million followers, and many continued to be updated after the occupations ended (Gaby & Caren, 2012, p. 368). Twitter, however, was the platform most closely associated with Occupy, an “essential tool” (Castells, 2015, p. 174; cf. Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 114). Twitter was designed for casual communication among friends, but it was readily adopted for organizational purposes. Tweets are brief (originally a maximum of 140 characters) and transmitted instantaneously, but often generate extended interactive discussion; many tweets respond to other tweets, linked by hashtags, expanding a conversation over vast distances. There were more than 100 Occupy-related Twitter accounts, and the main one, @OccupyWallStNYC, had more than 94,000 followers. During the occupation, tweets averaged between 400,000 and 500,000 a day, reaching a peak of more than 2 million on November 15, the day occupiers were evicted from Zuccotti Park (Penney & Dadas, 2014; Preston, 2011a; Tufekci, 2017).

Twitter quickly became a standard tool for logistical and strategic communication: announcing events, presenting a line of march at a demonstration, requesting needed supplies or support for actions, and calling for help in urgent situations, especially involving confrontations or expected confrontations

with the police during demonstrations. Twitter's ubiquity and ease of access also reinforced Occupy's decentralized, horizontal character (Penney & Dadas, 2014).<sup>6</sup>

But claims of the influence of social media and their value as organizing tools have been hotly debated (for a review, see Haunss, 2015). Enthusiasts claim that by reducing the cost of participation, digital networks potentially increase the level and scope of activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Earl & Kimport, 2011). But skeptics find that the evidence does not support these claims. They argue that Internet activism becomes a passive substitute for other forms of activism and limits political activity to routine, nondisruptive forms—Morozov's (2011) slacktivism (pp. 189–191; cf. Gladwell, 2010).

Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) is among the skeptics, particularly with regard to OWS. He argues that the social media calls got a relatively tepid response before the occupation: few followers, few likes. Only after the occupation and the initial police repression attracted the attention of the public did the social media, especially Twitter, attract much of a following. They then became important tools for real-time communication among occupations and between them and isolated observers. Within an occupation, they enabled logistical and strategic communication during marches and police confrontations. Gerbaudo concludes that "the crucial element in understanding social media in contemporary social movements is their interaction with and mediation of emerging forms of public gatherings" (pp. 5, 113–118, 127–128).

Students of social media also debate their value for social movement organization. Some argue that the digital media are not only effective, but essential given the demise of centralized political formations and the decay of ideological commitments in the present age; indeed, that the networks that they organize constitute a new model of political activity, "organizing without organizations" (Shirky, 2007; cf. Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber et al., 2005). They make it possible to organize without direct contact, even eliminating the need for "copresence" of participants in the same space (Earl & Kimport, 2011).

But for Zeynep Tufekci (2017), social media may make it easy to stage a protest and attract a large crowd with low organizational costs, but eliminating copresence in organizing deprives a movement of strengths that derive from assembling face-to-face; personal contacts become the basis of organization that can continue to promote the cause beyond the specific event. Moreover, she argues, the process of carrying out organizing tasks creates decision-making structures in which activists can resolve disputes and change direction when tactical shifts are required.

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<sup>6</sup> Since the 2016 presidential election, Twitter has become infamous for being used to corrupt civic discourse rather than to expand it democratically. In the face of a monumental backlash against social media, it is now difficult to recapture the optimism of only a few years ago about their potential for protest movements. Even those who debunked the exaggerated claims of their influence believed that social media offered possibilities for participatory, nonhierarchical communication controlled by the users without censorship. Since then, they have become notorious as channels for manipulation and deceit by demagogues.

In the case of Occupy, electronic communication was not an end in itself, but promoted and depended on participation on the ground. Occupation by definition requires the copresence of large numbers in the same space. In OWS, it was the physical presence of the occupiers that restored face-to-face interaction as a fundamental element of political activity (Hammond, 2012, p. 239; cf. Costanza-Chock, 2012, p. 378; Gerbaudo, 2012; Gould-Wartofsky, 2015). The mutual reinforcement of digital media and communication on the ground illustrates the value of recognizing a media ecosystem in which different "species" provide services to each other. As an editor of the *Occupied Wall Street Journal* (the only one of my respondents who insisted on anonymity, because of his day job) told me, social media "became a tool for action as opposed to a reason to stay on the couch" (personal interview, March 2, 2012). To Occupy, these media were not ends in themselves, but means to convoke people to real-time actions.

### **Video**

Activists captured everything on video and immediately posted it to YouTube and their own video sites. Video clips online documented police abuses at demonstrations, chronicled the visits of celebrities to Occupy sites, and allowed people to participate vicariously. Clips of public actions that challenged the boundaries of legitimacy demonstrated to viewers that they, too, could take over public space and violate formal rules. The act of transgressing was itself empowering, proving to people that by acting they can overcome structures that they regard as unjust.

The New York media team, centralized in Zuccotti Park and later in a nearby office, dispatched video crews to events. Katie Davison, a member of the team, explained, "We had to figure out how many cameras to send on each of the marches. It was difficult with limited resources; we had no walkie-talkies to coordinate, and we never knew where violence would break out" (personal interview, February 10, 2012). When a crew returned, the raw footage was uploaded to YouTube immediately, then edited into a more polished version, to be uploaded within a very short time—as little as 20 minutes. With somewhat more lead time, members of the media team produced a video using segments taken over a longer period of time.

Immediate transmission made videos and social media (and live streaming, discussed next) the preferred channels for reporting on the frequent police abuse of occupiers. The video crews were uniquely exposed to police violence, both to record it and to suffer it. That contributed to the collaborative process, according to Davison: "We started being targeted by cops. That creates camaraderie: You feel you are in battle. It created a community you don't often see in the arts" (personal interview, February 10, 2012).

Police attacks paradoxically reinforced the protesters' sense of power, because their actions forced authorities to respond, and because they publicized the abuses. Police overreaction generated public sympathy for occupations around the country. In effect, the police "operate as a public relations arm for Occupy Wall Street," as a *New York Times* reporter ironically suggested (Bellafante, 2011). Pepper spraying of peaceful demonstrators in two early marches converted a broad swath of the public from sympathetic amusement to active support of the protest. As I have argued elsewhere, however, sympathy based on repudiation of police abuse could also be a distraction, presenting protesters as victims,

deflecting attention from the substance of the protest to the dramatic and controversial aspects of the event itself (Hammond, 2013).

### ***Live Streaming***

The new technology permits transmitting an event through the Internet to the whole world as it happens. Some occupation sites had live streaming around the clock or at least during waking hours. Most prominently, however, streaming captured police brutality in real time. Formerly prohibitively expensive, the smartphone made live streaming practically free. More elaborate equipment could be used, ranging from a camera-equipped computer to actual video cameras, but the cheaper, more readily available, and portable equipment was also used to stream small meetings or public events. Conference calls among Occupy sites across the country became routine and sometimes were on the Internet for all to see and announced by Twitter and Facebook.

Live streaming technology was a novelty in 2011. Many of the streaming websites and software were developed as social media, for video games, or for other commercial purposes. Occupy put them to political use. Occupy streamers made important technological innovations, pioneering the aggregation and transmission of livestreams. On the Global Revolution website at [www.globalrev.org](http://www.globalrev.org), streams from all over the world were combined on a single screen so that viewers could pick and choose what they wanted to see. International solidarity took on greater meaning as people witnessed repression of distant comrades at the moment that it was happening. Acts of repression against many Arab Spring demonstrations and Occupy sites in the United States attracted large audiences. Occupy's streaming expanded the audience of Livestream.com and Ustream.com, two main commercial livestreaming websites, in the Fall 2011 and helped establish their commercial viability. Ustream even donated equipment to some of Occupy's more effective livestreamers (Preston, 2011b).

### ***Bat Signal***

The high point, literally, of high-tech communication was the projection of the "bat signal" on the Verizon building in downtown Manhattan. It was also one of the high points of creativity. The building is a 32-story windowless monolith, visible from the Brooklyn Bridge; Mark Read identified its surface as the ideal screen for the projection of a light show for thousands of demonstrators marching across the bridge on November 17, 2011. It showed a circular image (imitating the light projections in the Batman movies) flashing several Occupy slogans and then in rapid succession, "Occupy" with the names of about a hundred cities where occupations were happening, ending "Occupy everywhere." The visually arresting projection can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxG4g62rnd8>. It was pronounced "the year's most emblematic work" in a year-end wrap-up of artworks (Davis, 2011).

But the story of its creation is also emblematic of media production in Occupy, featuring humor, collaboration, and an integration of advanced technology with low-tech improvisation. A woman living in a neighboring housing project offered her apartment for a projection booth. According to Read, interviewed by [boingboing.net](http://boingboing.net),

The whole thing was a combination of high tech and super jerry-rigging on the fly. The Modul8 software we were using can do amazing things: sense the angle you're projecting at, even if it's extreme, and modify the image so it looks straight. But then, we held the projector in place with gaffer tape, a broomstick, some baling wire. We only had 20 minutes to get it ready. (Jardin, 2011, para. 35)

As with hand signals in meetings, hand-painted signs, and the subordination of social media to in-person interaction, the bat signal exemplified the flourishing of do-it-yourself technologies in the OWS media ecosystem, with high tech enlisted in their service. Occupiers were anything but Luddites: They avidly embraced the new technologies. Still, one can almost hear the triumph in Read's account: Virtual reality has not completely displaced material reality, at least not yet.

Not only a feat of technological creativity, the projection of the bat signal also embodied the pervasive lightheartedness and humor in the Occupy movement. The Batman movies satirize the notion of superhero and the bat signal as it appears in the films is a technological fantasy. Its use here satirized the hype of the superhero image but also, Read told me, was meant to put that hype in the service of the agenda of Occupy, from 99% to "Occupy everywhere," with the message that "we are our own hero, we are our own salvation" (personal interview by telephone, March 7, 2012).

To repeat, no one owned OWS or its media projects. No central authority created Occupy websites or artistic creations or dictated their content. In keeping with the spirit of the Occupy movement, anyone could join, could do anything, and claim to be representing the movement. Anything put out with the label Occupy could claim to be just as representative as any other contribution. The range of media and genres together with the content of their messages reveal the creativity that the occupation unleashed.

### **Relations of Media Production**

OWS's media, ranging from face-to-face interaction to texts and images produced for public distribution in print or on the Internet,<sup>7</sup> all took a form that embodied the nonhierarchical, participatory, leaderless ethos of Occupy. In the case of group efforts, that ethos was also embodied in a process of production based on voluntary activity and horizontal collaboration. Groups strove to realize the ideal of cooperation and creativity entailed by the ideal of prefigurative social relations, anticipating in the present the victory over alienation that would characterize a society of human emancipation, an ideal that sometimes came close to being realized.

Whether high tech or low, the means of production were in the hands of activists. High-tech media and low-tech, unmediated interaction were integrated. The work done in all these media involved self-creation, in most cases by collaborative work teams in production and in distribution that were committed to equality among participants. In other words, they facilitated unalienated labor in the

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<sup>7</sup> I have not discussed music and performances by Occupy activists, which deserve separate treatment. I have elsewhere discussed certain kinds of performances (Hammond, 2015c).

production of communication. The desire for unalienated labor and the belief that technology, although a useful tool, must be subordinate to political purposes came readily to the occupiers, many of whom made their living by freelancing, often in media-related work, whereas others lived off the land to avoid jobs and entanglement with the capitalist economy. Some who joined the occupation had relatively little education, no identifiable skill, and no fixed domicile. (Their shared circumstances made them especially receptive to the anarchist sensibility that prevailed in OWS; Hammond, 2015a.)

The occupation was marked by collaboration in tasks of administration, maintenance, and political mobilization. Someone picked up a tool, whether a broom or a computer, and did needed work. In performing these tasks, including media production, they worked together on a plane of equality. On site full time or at least during waking hours, some willingly put in 10 or 12 hours a day or more. When people are working voluntarily, they can work twice as long and twice as hard as when they are being paid; their labor is genuinely unalienated. The spirit of equality, commitment, and solidarity that pervaded the occupation provided the incentive to perform at the top of their capacity. Occupiers started out calling their movement leaderless; they came to prefer to call it "leaderful."

In the technical teams, distinctions among the well and poorly educated, the salaried and the free counted for little. Skilled professionals and newcomers worked together, and the novices were integrated and trained. Making videos involved rapid delegation and rapid production. According to Katie Davison, "As more volunteers who didn't have skills [showed up] we tried to incorporate them. [We got them to] do some running first, power stripping, then come on a shoot with me, carry batteries, guard" (personal interview, February 10, 2012). Media production, according to Davison, who worked in film production before joining the occupation,

has always been a hierarchical institution. You have the director, the producer, someone calls the shots. A lot of us were coming from that background, so it was different to work in an environment that wasn't like that, to figure out how to have everyone's voices heard. (personal interview, February 10, 2012)

The spontaneity of work organization itself opened opportunities. Michael Fix of the video team, a professional cameraman, explained, "If you made yourself available, within two or three days you are the go-to person. They call it a leaderful movement" (personal interview, January 27, 2012). The experienced producers took charge of cultivating the skills and judgment of novices who volunteered, giving them responsibility as quickly as they were willing to take it on.

Those working in art also worked collectively. According to Maria Byck of Arts and Labor, "so much of the art we make in Occupy Wall Street is collaborative; we do it in a group. For me that is so much more where art resides than in the final product" (personal interview, August 23, 2012). They rejected the hierarchy and star system that dominate professional artistic production in New York and elsewhere.

The group that maintained the Twitter account @OccupyWallStNYC called itself the Tweetboat. It was not formally constituted until after the eviction, but had begun tweeting in the first days of the

occupation. It also incorporated novices and trained them to provide and edit tweets. Most of the Tweetboat crew were involved in other activities within the occupation as well, and they brought in news and proposed topics to cover. The @OccupyWallStNYC account won the 2011 Shorty award for activism presented by the Real-Time Academy of Short Form Arts & Sciences.

The *Occupied Wall Street Journal* had a five-member editorial group in charge, but it also had an army of volunteers to write, help with production tasks, and distribute the paper. At the same time, the norm of equality prevailed to such an extent that members of the editorial group also went out into the city to hand the paper out on the subway or elsewhere.

Media operations cost money. Although all the groups received donations from outside parties—whether of equipment, workspace, or cash—some also drew on the large pool of money donated to the occupation itself. In a nominally leaderless movement in which authority rested in a General Assembly of indeterminate membership, disagreements often arose when a project requested a share of the funds, leading to disputes about whether the media represented the movement. Controversy over the General Assembly's distribution of funds led some of the projects to raise needed money independently so as not to be beholden to it.

Participatory media have their drawbacks, and so do movements for which they are the primary means of communication. Open participation takes up a lot of time. Oscar Wilde reportedly said that the problem with socialism is that it would take too many evenings (Walzer, 1970, p. 230). In Occupy, it was even worse: Commitment required virtually full-time participation. Most people cannot occupy permanently, and therefore must remain on the periphery when an occupation is the heart of a movement. Freelancers and free spirits are more available than others for participation, among other reasons, because they do not have the obligations of a regular schedule.

Moreover, communication processes intended to guarantee everyone the right to participation and equal voice can nevertheless leave some out. Just as the demand for intense participation excludes those who have other commitments or simply do not want to participate, it allows others to dominate participatory processes through their louder voices or wearing others down with their greater tolerance for endless meetings (Freeman, 1972–1973; Hammond, 2012).

The intensity of interaction and the absence of rewards, in money or hierarchical distinction, can lead to burnout and occasionally explosive conflicts. Two of the people who were most engaged in the media team and told me about the collaborative endeavor with greatest enthusiasm nevertheless left after conflicts with other members, although they did not abandon the movement but assumed other tasks.

### **Conclusion**

Studying the media production of Occupy Wall Street as an ecosystem draws attention to its multiple voices, genres, and technological levels and the relations among them. At the same time, however, the ecosystem analogy obscures other important points. Biophysical ecosystems are self-contained, whereas media are addressed to an outside audience. Biophysical ecosystems, moreover, generally approximate an equilibrium: An ecosystem changes only very slowly, and it has no goals other



than its own perpetuation. The analysis therefore does not incorporate purposeful action on a human timescale. Most important, it leaves out politics. But a media ecosystem is necessarily political, and OWS's media ecosystem even more so. The form of communication is a political choice. The content of the message privileges some media forms over others.

Occupy called for social and economic equality both at the macro level and in interpersonal relations in the society that was created in Zuccotti Park. These goals were mirrored in its media practices. At the macro level, its media challenged the corporate domination of the means of production and distribution. At the micro level, participation was widespread, uncensored, and nonhierarchical.

This double pursuit dictated a plurality of media carrying their message in a variety of forms. The technological and artistic demands were highly varied, but the practices—whether or not entailing high technology or formal art—involved egalitarian and engaged relations of production. High-tech media may appear more exclusive and may appear to demand priority, but actors tailor the high-tech media, too, to their own purposes; their use is not exclusively determined by the technology. The digital media did not dominate. Broadly speaking, the media embodied a visual and rhetorical style and work relations, both of which expressed and reinforced its prefigurative and collaborative ethos. Understanding media must therefore go beyond an ecological analysis to one that incorporates the intentions of the producers and relations among themselves and to their society.

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