Mediated Social Movements After the Financial Collapse: From the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street

Editorial Note

Aziz Douai, PhD
University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Canada

Miranda Brady, PhD
Carleton University, Canada

Social, economic and political crises openly invite activists and critical scholars to rethink their approaches in considering how collective action can creatively address the challenge of mobilizing social movements for fundamental change. With their deep local and global repercussions, two recent events have offered great social promise, while sparking academic inquiry. The most severe financial crisis to hit the global capitalist economy in almost a century gave birth to the Occupy Wall Street movement and its global affiliates in 2011. Correspondingly, the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor in 2010 inspired massive demonstrations that toppled one of the world’s most authoritarian and repressive regimes, spawning the so-called “Arab Spring.” Each of these two cases, in conversation with one another, renewed activists’ hope that social movements still constitute potent change agents capable of transforming the status quo.

Feeding off such opportunities, multidisciplinary efforts have sought to understand how activists can effectively harness new social and technological tools to spur collective action and
social change. The heavy employment of social media in these movements has further focused this intense research attention on activists’ incorporation of new technologies in their fight for social change. Unfailingly, the central issue involved in this task is a variant of the following question: How can new communication tools help mobilize more inactive citizens in the fight for social justice at both the local and global levels? How do other cultural forms and modes of protest such as artistic expression inform and blur with new media practices? While these questions may be beguilingly simple, they have long informed, if not obsessed, communication scholarship and its inquiry into how technologies and social change dialectically interact.

This special issue of The American Communication Journal contributes to this effort by exploring mediated social movements in the aftermath of the biggest financial collapse in more than seventy years. It offers various theoretical and methodological perspectives that focus on new media social change intersections in the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and Dominion cooperative movements. While the movements discussed are diverse and have emerged from various locales, new media have been central in their constitution and mobilization. Moreover, they espouse many similar complaints about modern inequality manifesting itself in the form of political oppression, economic disparity, media conglomeration, and struggles over natural resources. At the same time, these movements are polyvocal and have continued to reproduce inequitable relations of power for traditionally marginalized groups. This issue explores the tactics of critics who seek to reform more predominant social movements, as well as alternative aesthetic modes which might inform the ways in which protest takes place, moving beyond discourse to other emotive appeals.

The insights and ideas about social movements included herein surface out of these contributions: an examination of the communities of practice centered on Howtooccupy.org; an analysis of social media’s role in the 2011 Egyptian street protests and profiles of the most “influential” users; an analysis of online texts emerging from Decolonize Wall Street, a movement which seeks to contest and reform the “Occupy” movement based on Indigenous concerns; and an examination of the aesthetics of dissent in Dominion, a self-identified radical and participatory new media news project, as well as Ladies Sasquatch, a sculpture installation which offers alternative aesthetics for expressing dissent and alternative modes of truth telling. The articles aim to instigate and inform critical conversations about the possibilities of activism arising out of a contemporary and mediated global context.

The first contribution devotes its attention to the “tactics” of resistance in the employment of Indigenous themes and discourses of decolonization in “Decolonize Wall Street.” In “Decolonize Wall Street! Indigenous Themes in the Occupy Wall Street Movement,” Miranda Brady and Derek Antoine explore the “Decolonize Wall Street” movement and how it “expands critiques of power beyond economics, reminding protesters that they are ‘guests’ on Aboriginal lands and benefit from systems of colonization and capitalism that have historically worked to disenfranchise Indigenous groups” (p. 2).

In the second article, “Online-Offline Knowledge Sharing in the Occupy Movement: Howtooccupy.org and Discursive Communities of Practice,” Doug Tewksbury ponders the ways in which the Occupy movement interconnected its communities through negotiating online-offline networks of information sharing and practical political strategies. Tewksbury scrutinizes
the user-generated content practices that Howtooccupy.org offers the Occupy communities. Focusing on the context, the means, and content of interconnectedness that these “communities of practice” weave yields important insights into democratic social movements and discursive practices, as demonstrated by Tewksbury.

In “‘Seeds of Change’ in Tahrir Square and Beyond: People Power or Technological Convergence,” the third article of this special volume, Aziz Douai discusses the role of social media in “the Arab Spring.” He situates the question of social media and socio-political change within a larger context, suggesting the “democratic” shifts that we are witnessing today in the region are outcomes of deep and historical transformations encountered by Arab societies. The article concludes that the convergence of “technological” and “human” forces are driving the ongoing “democratic” wave and revitalizing the Arab public sphere.

The final contribution interrogates structures of legitimacy and challenges to them through varying aesthetic and discursive forms. In “Aesthetics of Legitimacy: Resisting the Effects of Power with "Grassroots" News & Queer Sasquatches,” Michael Lithgow asks how radical art might inform conventional modes and forms of contestation, raising the question, “If truth reflects relations of power, what legitimate cultural forms reflect resistance to those relations? In other words, how is it possible to protest “truth” without seeming foolish or simply wrong?” (p. 33).

The diversity of topics addressed in this special issue underscores the importance of recognizing major social movements such as Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street as polyvocal, transmediated, and socially and culturally contingent. Importantly, the articles herein also point out the power imbalances, which can continue within new social movements, and alternative aesthetic and cultural forms for raising them. While the articles herein recognize the central role of (new) media in recent social movements, they by no means wish to forward a deterministic argument about technology, but rather complicate and trace out the nuances of media uses and cultural needs and problems. Taken as a compilation, these articles suggest that mediated social movements after the financial collapse can and do offer radical change and mobilize meaningful political action. However, further critical examination is necessary to explain the complex relationships emerging within the contemporary activist terrain.