



Online-Offline Knowledge Sharing in the Occupy Movement: Howtooccupy.org and Discursive Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

The effects of the Occupy movement of 2011-2012 reverberated around the globe as a network-centric, decentralized protest, yet there have been few studies into the ways in which the movement built interconnectedness into its communities through the negotiation of online-offline networks of information sharing and pragmatic political practices. This project investigates the case study of howtooccupy.org, a site utilizing user-generated content for discursive theoretical and practical knowledge-sharing. I explore what Lave and Wenger (1988) call ‘communities of practice’ in the global Occupy movement by theorizing the discursive strategies of users through their interaction with user-generated content on this site. This project suggests that it is important to understand the context, means, and content of interconnectedness as it relates to social capital building within communities of practice, particularly in democratic social movements.

KEYWORDS: Occupy, Wall Street, Community of Practice, Social Media, Political Movement, User Generated Content

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The global Occupy Movement emerged in 2011 with a remarkable momentum and synchronicity of both tactics and timing. The central tenets of participatory democracy - an integration of civic and political action, group decision-making, community narrative, and collective empowerment – underlay this movement, and while each branch of this network power had its own agenda and trajectory, many have very recently wrestled with how to frame these protests’ lasting effects and future developments on theory (Bruff, 2012; Kiersey, 2012; Kilbarda, 2012, O’Brien, 2011).

Regardless, these collectives represented a new approach to the exercise of grassroots participatory democracy, particularly through their organizational structures that were focused less on hierarchical leadership and more on lateral relationships, connections that affirm the central tenet of these movements that the diffusion of power is essential for the public good (Tarrow, 2011 Oct. 10; Wenger, 2012 Feb. 17). And while the Occupy movement was not strictly a social media movement of bystander spectatorship or Facebook ‘Slacktivism,’ it could not have had its organizing potential or global reach without the interconnectedness of Web 2.0 user-generated media, technologies firmly embedded in the recent shift of the web from a site of information retrieval to a platform for collaborative knowledge-building (O’Reilly, 2005). As Hardt & Negri (2011, Oct. 11) note, “Such network instruments do not create the movements, of course, but they are convenient tools, because they correspond in some sense to the horizontal network structure and democratic experiments of the movements themselves” (para. 8).

Many people noticed, both in and out of academia. Time Magazine, for example, declared its 2011 Person of the Year to be ‘The Protester’ (Anderson, 2011 Dec. 14), and while politicians and media pundits around the globe weighed in on each movements’ efficacy, purpose, tactics, and legitimacy, it became clear that these movements represented a new, different kind of political movement community.

What is less clear, though, is our present understanding of the way that these organizations built social capital through the mediated interconnectedness of their communities’ constituents. This paper uses qualitative textual analysis to provide a theoretical underpinning to these new forms of political action by examining the way that Web 2.0/user-generated content platforms were used in order to foster what Lave and Wenger (1988) call ‘communities of practice,’ collectives that share information with the goal of belongingness, identity, solidarity, and action. I look specifically at Howtooccupy.org, a knowledgebase and information clearinghouse of theoretical and practical resources for Occupy chapters, to problematize this theory, as well as to understand the role that these media had for creating, maintaining, and transforming each respective community through information sharing. As such, I am particularly interested in these groups’ use of media to foster the concept of *community interconnectedness through practical, mediated knowledge-sharing*, exploring the importance of these mediations to the movement’s constituents in developing a local and global community of practice.

Theorizing Communities of Practice

While the concept is often cited in cultural studies literature, the question *community* in terms of the global, decentralized Occupy movement has been notably absent from much academic literature thus far, particularly in terms of the way in which media fostered shared, communal meaning and values. Yet such an analysis is important if we are to formally embed the way in which communities (especially with politically active communities) navigate the relationship between offline-online knowledge generation and practice as these barriers continue to erode following the ‘mobility turn’ of recent years (Sheller & Urry, 2006). As such, contextualization is imperative in understanding these communities and the building of social capital, particularly as they evolve into future movements.

Within one month of the onset of Occupy Wall Street in New York City, there were chapters in over sixty American cities (Occupy Wall Street, 2011), and the rise of these grassroots movements with such rapid deployment fundamentally destabilized our current understanding of the relationship between the global elite and the power of sovereign communities to determine their own direction. Therefore, understanding these groups’ constituent communities, how they construct their communities (both online and offline), and how the politics of everyday life are mediated through technology, is essential for understanding the future of protest organizations that will, no doubt, also incorporate a decentralized network structure of organization through interconnected social and mobile media use. But perhaps more importantly, the study of these specific organizations allows a window into larger processes and practices of both localized and global societies, as well as the global flows of information that affect culture and community.

Communities of Practice and User-Generated Content

The concept of the community of practice, first developed by Lave and Wenger (1988), describes the way that members of groups cooperate and collaborate through discourse and interaction in order to generate and share both knowledge and practices. In this theoretical construct, an organization learns from its members’ interaction in an ongoing formation and transformation of those practices that are important to the collective, including the articulation of the values the group holds, the way that the organization actually enacts some practice, and continuing strategies to learn how to do that thing better through discursive sharing.

As communities of practice develop their domain, their community structure and organization, and – in this case, most importantly – their practice, they become stronger and more skilled at using cultural practices to further their interest (Wenger, 1998; Wenger 2006). Wenger (2006) describes it as such:

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers

working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. (para. 3)

The concept of a community of practice began as an exercise in developing strategies to increase social capital amongst communities. Unfortunately, as Lave and Wenger (1991) note, this idea has largely been co-opted by organizational psychologists and organizational communication scholars in order to increase ‘off-the-clock’ labor in its employees, furthering Hardt & Negri’s (2005) observation that the trend in global labor strategies has moved toward the notion of “flexibility, temporality, invisibility, and domesticity” (p. 134) as well as affective labor. It appears that their observation is correct, as the business literature on this theory literature is expansive, and workers’ role growing increasingly precarious.

As a theory, the community of practice provides a practical and conceptual framework to explain the way in which collectives organized around a common practice develop, transform, and learn from each other through the communication of both theoretical and practical knowledge (Wenger, 2009). However, there have been few attempts, if any, to theoretically link communities of practice to these new types of grassroots organizations, few applications of this concept to those organizations that are forming network-centric communities that use social/mobile media tools in order to develop social capital. If a community of practice is a cultural production that comes from mediations of interconnectedness and practice between individuals, then it is particularly important that to be able to broaden the understanding of the way that protest organization practices foster community and social capital in a larger cultural context.

Analysis: Howtooccupy.org and Discursive Communities of Practice

Howtooccupy.org is a site that was formed in 2011 in response to the catalyst of the Occupy protests in New York City and in more than 700 communities around the globe (Walters, 2011). In its own words, the site is:

conceived to promote and spread the methods, techniques and knowledge about peaceful occupation of public spaces while developing sustainable ways of living based on participatory democracy...Our goal is to establish a universal and accessible database made up of documents related to peaceful civil disobedience and grassroots practices, spreading it physically and on-line to the very assemblies, occupations and groups around the whole world.” (“How to Occupy – About,” 2012, paras. 1& 2)

Howtooccupy.org functions as a resource of user-generated ‘how-to’ articles and knowledge-sharing articles amongst those who were interested in starting, maintaining, or making more efficient their respective Occupy communities. In a sense, the site is a knowledge

base of the practical and theoretical tactics, both in its inclusion of original works written for the Occupy communities, as well as a link-sharing resource for other sites of interest to those in these communities. Its goal is “to put together all the experiences the older camps have had in order to put them to the service of new occupations in a successive way, creating a collaborative chain of information” (“How to Occupy – About,” 2012, para. 2) through the use of the principles of user-generated content and Web 2.0 information sharing networks. Indeed, the site has notable social media integration for each article with clickable links to Twitter, Facebook, Digg, del.icio.us, stumbleupon, RSS, and Facebook, including its dedicated Facebook site, which as of July 2012 has just under 5,000 ‘likes’ (“HowToCampHowToOccupy”, ca. 2012).

As of mid-2012, the site, itself, contains over 200 articles and links, written in more than a dozen languages, each produced and translated by a volunteer base – there is no monetary compensation for any participation in the site. Nor is there any advertising; the site is supported by donations. Its structure is subdivided into nine macro-level categories of resources - Civil Disobedience, Legal, Revolution, Assemblies, Camping, Police, Internet, N-1 (a file-distribution system), and Building a New World – and numerous sub-categories, such as First Aid, Non-Violent Revolution, Media, and other such topical tags. The site, much like many in the Occupy movement, functions as a free and open information platform for the production and retrieval of information, an ideal that is firmly rooted into the populist fabric of the movements, themselves.

Users are able to comment on any article and often begin vigorous discursive exchange in these forums as a primary medium of exchange for the interaction of this community of practice (as well as with those outside of or resistant to the community, who engaged the content of these articles through the comments sections). Furthermore, all material produced for the site is licensed under a Creative Commons/Copy left free distribution based in what the site calls “the power of synergy applied to creative commons and copy left for the benefit of the many” (“How to Occupy – About,” 2012, para. 1). Many of the articles are submitted by users as links of interest, and later posted (often uncredited) by the central two administrators of the site under the usernames alicekhatiba and Niel-O.T.R.O.

In terms of facilitating a healthy community of practice through the generation and sharing of knowledge, there are several distinct tendencies of strategies and characteristics of interaction and discourse that emerged in order to refine, develop, maintain, and debate both practical and theoretical knowledge through Howtooccupy.org.

Establishing a Common Narrative: Articulating Community Values and Beliefs

The first is the articulation of community and community values through the establishment of a common narrative of action. Wenger (2006) states that through the community axis of his modeling of communities of practice, “Members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other” (para. 6). As such, these articles and comment sections function as a forum for debate and deliberation within the community from a wide variety of perspectives.

What is particularly interesting is the way in which these narratives have become formulated through the sharing of personal experiences alongside protest strategies. If the goal of a community of practice is to learn how to do a thing from other group members and, with that knowledge, to understand how to do that thing better, the intra-organizational spaces where discourse take place are essential in establishing a commons of knowledge-sharing.

However, it is also important for a community of practice to be able to articulate what it is that makes it a community, to be able to discursively articulate communities' values, particularly as a non-linear, ever-evolving process that mirrors the evolution a decentralized group such as the Occupy movement. Shortly following the first month of the Occupy protest in New York that quickly spread to other cities around the globe, there were a spate of both articles posted and comments that show the development of this community and the ongoing articulation of how the group, as a community of practice, would establish its philosophical principles and practices.

For example, the commented line of discussion over the very nature of what the Occupy Movement should be led to a among the most vigorous debates on the site over the very nature of what type of community this would be, both in terms of philosophy and in terms of actionable practices, through over 120 comments responding to the original article. Username Nils Chaplet (2011, Nov. 1) comments that, "I believe that we should demand amending the constitution to include economic sustainability as a requirement to make business. We should demand this as a # 1 priority" (para. 1). Username Catherine Hanssens asked, "Is there a plan to have voter registration [sic] at the OWS sites?" (para. 1). Username Slam suggested to the community, "Why don't we start a movement where everone [sic] takes out all their money from their bank accounts and hold them for 1 week. This will create a huge cash shortage for the banks and wall street depends on banks to move stocks" (para. 1).

More interestingly, though, username Matthew Ziolkovski (2011, Nov. 13) follows up dozens of posts later with a more refined articulation, particularly in re-enforcing the group's collective establishing principles and non-violent ethic:

Reason has never yielded to the overwhelming force of ignorance or pointed interests. Instead this generation has seen a new aspect rise from this hydra; one of careful exhaustion. We deal daily with a careful effort of being human under the watching skies of insidious lobbies, and special interests hidden by ill-wrought laws. This is our challenge to rout them out; our generation's Clarion call....This is not in bloodshed, no violence has ever been needed except by perverted logic and evil politics. But sweat. Together we will show the fanatics, the holocaust deniers, those who despise civil-rights, the profiteers by corrupt laws and those demagogues prefacing vile logic. And we shall do this reasonably, safely, eternally (paras. 1 & 2).

Communities of practice thrive on discourse and interaction. The uses of technology in order to facilitate these interactions lead closer to an idealized public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Habermas, 1992), certainly lowering the barriers to entry, but also allowing for the creation of a body politic with clearly articulated values, beliefs, and structures. The Occupy movement was often criticized for having a lack of focus or demands, but from the onset, this movement was different. Commenting on the question of the need for firm, unified goals, username TJ, responded “It’s a redress of grievances that is so obvious it does not need a goal, or a list of demands. Our founding fathers set up the constitution for just this purpose” (para. 1). It is also important to note that social/mobile media may not have been the cause of the Occupy movement, but the movement could not have reached such a critical mass without these media. Particularly through the use of the site’s Facebook and Twitter presence, users at Occupy sites had access to the resources at Howtooccupy.org as readers, but also the ability to discursively contribute to the discussions occurring at this site, as well as several others, over the very nature of the movement’s mission, goals, values, and efficacy of action as a community of practice.

Information Sharing: Practical Community Problem-Solving Practices

The collaborative establishment of problem-solving practices, particularly the tried-and-true or tried-and-failed best practices for Occupy encampments around the globe, primarily addresses the establishment of what Wenger (2006) terms the “shared repertoire of resources: Experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems” (para. 8). Through the establishment of a strong public sphere through discourse and interaction, problems are most often more effectively solved in a group or organization, particularly one that welcomes input in a free, diverse, and open forum of communication. As a centralized resource site, Howtooccupy.org allows its users and constituent communities to both discursively share their tactics, whether organizational, technological, mediated, or on-the-ground strategic. Writes Ahmed Sabry, an Egyptian protester aligned with the movement,

To make sure it is peaceful, organizers should be around the demonstrations at all times, if anyone gets out of hand arrest him and deliver him to the police yourselves...Most important, keep it peaceful whatever happens, you will get much more supporters that way. . Believe in yourself and don’t worry about how many will come, everyone who was hurt by the system is on your side.

Furthermore, the sharing of practices extended to online strategies. In a dialogue explaining the successful strategies of Occupy Portland, user alicekhatiba (2011, Oct. 17) presented an entry detailing the ways in which social media strategies could be used in order to both foster solidarity between different Occupy chapters, as well as the public:

Sending messages to those working at Occupy Wall Street was definitely helped us gain notice. People are heavily following #occupywallstreet, #takewallstreet, #usdor, as well as a number of other widely used hash tags. Each tweet sent out would include a tag with a trending tag, my city (#pdx) as well as a link to the

facebook group...Also we paid attention to the amount of followers people had, and mentioned them as well...Nearly all of us are using Twitter, so they used the same approach when spreading the group link around the internet. (paras. 1 & 2).

More importantly, though, the long-term sustainability of these requirements necessitated a knowledge-sharing community in order to sustain the community structure and to allow for a better efficacy in achieving the movement's goals. Such articles were created on "Dry Toilet Manual" (alicekhatiba, 2011 Oct. 13), "How to Set Up a Live Streaming News Cell" (Neil-O.T.R.O, 2012 Mar. 1), describing strategies for posting live-streaming video to the internet with a mobile phone, and eleven different articles describing strategies for developing relationships with police and strategies for managing the rights of protesters if these relationships should sour. Additionally, the site was used widely to distribute information related to addressing medical needs and first-aid to injured occupiers, from field dressings to strategies to treat tear-gassing.

These types of discourse allow for the creation of a community of practice in which the sharing of knowledge influences the practices, themselves. This proved to be particularly useful for this decentralized network of protest that occurred in many different locations. This was true not only due to the vast scale of this movement, but also in the fact that as the most mobilized protest in at least a decade, the Occupy movement involved many first-time protesters, as well as seasoned individuals, with a wide range of practical experience in surviving outdoors for long terms. This requires a number of practical considerations that are not normally seen in more temporally short-term protests, such as sanitation, long-term tent residence, medical conditions, food preparation and storage, and other day-to-day considerations for a weeks- or months-long occupation.

In a 15-point article, "How to Make a Successful Occupation" (Niel-O.T.R.O., 2011 Nov. 26), states that "what I share with you is a little of my experience in how the police tend to react and try to disperse these encampments as well as some of the things that were developed over time to fix problems that were cropping up" (para. 1), further offering his experience:

"THINGS TO BRING. Tent, Gazebo [sic], Sleeping Bags, Blankets, Banners, Gaffa tape, chalk, yourself, musical instruments, a video phone for videoing any police brutality and also for getting the positive message out there. You will also find that one of those inflatable camping mats is the best money you have ever spent. Take nothing that you would care about getting confiscated unless you can carry it with you, ie. Don't take a £500 tent" (para. 15).

A number of comments furthered the discussion on practical considerations,

I taught winter camping in Northern Minnesota. The key to staying warm in cold weather is staying dry and dressing in layers...Staying warm during the day is possible by dressing in layers and using LIGHT exercise to turn calories into body

heat...Dry socks are key to keeping feet warm. With two or more sets of socks you can remove damp socks and swap the spare ones onto your feet... (Dana, 2011 Nov. 29, paras. 1-4)

Forget Gortex! Occupiers should get a set of Carhart Overalls, jackets and heavy boots. These are very heavy winter clothes that keep you very warm in really cold weather. All Construction workers have a set. You've seen them, the reddish brown padded canvas overalls and jackets. They have another benefit as well. The padding is quite thick and police batons can't do much damage to someone wearing them. Spread this word to occupiers! (Watt, 2011 Nov. 18)

The sharing of knowledge in the collective is particularly useful in maintaining a successful movement, and the use of user-generated content allows for the transference of individual knowledge and experience into a community forum to be adopted, transformed, embraced or rejected.

This sharing was particularly useful for allowing new members to have a entry point into the organization. Several community commenters on these postings/comments noted that this was their first time in a protest such as this one, and thanking the contributors for sharing their information. For a new and decentralized organization such as the global Occupy movement that also involved a number of protesters who hadn't previously participated in this type of protest before, it immediately became important to these communities to be able to effectively share their resources with one another in order to eliminate barriers to the long-term efficacy of the movement.

The practical considerations were somewhat understated by many media outlets, and these information-sharing networks provided key information of practices that would sustain the movement (particularly through the cold climates of the Fall and Winter of 2011-2012). Even the protection of mobile phones against confiscation by authorities became a subject of discussion through "Mobile Tactics for Participants in Peaceful Assemblies" (Niel-O.T.R.O, 2011 Oct. 24), discussing the risks of seizure of data content, phone records, photos and video, text messages, and other aspects of mobile telephony.

The user-generated article provided practical, actionable advice to the Occupy community that "Each of these risks can be mitigated to some extent so long as you plan ahead, know your phone, and the basics of how mobile communications works. Remember though that every situation is different and that mobile phones are inherently insecure communication devices. We urge you to review this Primer on Mobile Risks for more guidance in assessing your mobile risks" (para. 3). Other discussions argued for a vigilant eye toward undercover integration from law enforcement or for strategies to avoid baiting by provocateurs that might be working undercover in Occupy groups to agitate the group against itself or against the police.

Conclusions

In a decentralized, network-structured, global organization such as the Occupy movement that functions very much as a hybrid of globalized space- and place- based collectives, it is not just the production of knowledge that allows for the community to thrive. Rather, it is the *sharing* of this knowledge that creates community, and in this case, the establishment of a information commons of practices and values that crystalizes the community of practice through discourse. In the establishment of a community of practice, an organization learns from itself, pooling its collective knowledge together, and debating it, refining through discourse to arrive at a general consensus. For the Occupy movement around the globe, particularly given its heavy use of traditional/social/mobile media to attract new members and to have its message heard, the notion of consensus and inclusivity functioned as a central principle in both its material protest and its online presence.

The barrier, however, to any community of practice can come through lack of knowledge about these discussions, or – more commonly – lack of access to have a voice in the public sphere discourse that surrounds the offline events that take place. The nexus of online-offline community building is often a complicated one with any community, but particularly in a community of practice that most definitely has a defined practice, but by design has no clearly defined community membership other than one's willingness to belong.

Every community of practice is at its root a collective that shares with one another, whether through material or immaterial means, their practices, discourse, possessions, or affect. The collective benefits when its constituent parts contribute to their idealized ends. The role of the individual, then, is to not only consume the knowledge that is available to him/her from the community, but ideally, to use the wealth of established structural knowledge in order to build upon this foundation through the generation of new material, new discourse. The creation of a community of practice through these new means allows for the sharing of interactions and an interconnectedness of both values and practices. The Occupy movement's heavy reliance on the relatively open platform of Web 2.0 principles and mobile/social media, as well as its temporal goals of months-long occupation of online and offline space, allowed for knowledge-sharing to take place through the community-based sites, such as Howtooccupy.org. What will be particularly interesting to see is where these types of technologies go next, where discursive knowledge-sharing networks take future protests. Whether the Occupy movement has stalled, or whether it has just paused before its transformative moment into an increased resistance, it appears that the use of user-generated content knowledge-sharing platforms amongst these types of network-based, decentralized protest organizations is a fundamentally powerful way to establish a unified community of practice.

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