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*New Media Society* 2014 16: 74 originally published online 15 March 2013

DOI: 10.1177/1461444813479593

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# (Re)Tweeting in the service of protest: Digital composition and circulation in the Occupy Wall Street movement

new media & society  
2014, Vol. 16(1) 74–90  
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DOI: 10.1177/1461444813479593  
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## Abstract

Based on 17 in-depth interviews with people involved in the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, we present a typology of how Twitter is used in the service of protest that draws attention to its utilization in conjunction with face-to-face actions. The OWS case study demonstrates how the rapid digital circulation of texts allows protestors to quickly build a geographically dispersed, networked counterpublic that can articulate a critique of power outside of the parameters of mainstream media. Furthermore, we find that the relay of pre-existing material was perceived to be just as meaningful a form of participation as drafting original compositions. By including these forwarding activities in their online efforts, these Twitter users worked to expand the circulation of information building and sustaining an OWS counterpublic. However, dependence on this external platform leaves protestors vulnerable to restrictions on their ability to communicate, as well as to unwanted surveillance from potentially hostile authorities.

## Keywords

Digital rhetoric and composition, online activism, social media, social movements, Twitter

## Introduction

The movement known as Occupy Wall Street (OWS) began on September 17 2011, amid a burst of online word-of-mouth and little mainstream media coverage. The first

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protests took place in New York City, with Zuccotti Park near Wall Street serving as the “occupied” territory. Word of the movement quickly spread, primarily through digital technologies, and within weeks dozens of local Occupy collectives sprang up across the United States and beyond. As reported in *The New York Times*, the protests eventually led to a “media frenzy” during the fall of 2011, with some commentators comparing the movement to the Arab Spring revolutions in the Middle East and Northern Africa, which were similarly “spurred by social media” (Sorkin, 2012). In a collectively written declaration posted on their website, the OWS protestors in New York City outlined their grievances, explaining that they “gather together in solidarity to express a feeling of mass injustice” regarding the way in which “corporations, which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression over equality, run our governments” (New York City General Assembly, 2011). With the slogan “We are the 99%” serving as a rhetorical rallying cry, the OWS movement has continued to employ direct action (such as encampments, marches, and demonstrations) as well as non-traditional media outreach to publicize a broad-based critique of corporate power and its influence on the political process.

Beginning with the initial Adbusters poster for the New York City protest, which used a hashtag in its slogan (#occupywallstreet), Twitter quickly became the technological platform most closely associated with OWS. As the movement grew, Twitter served a variety of purposes, as users attempted to coordinate their activities and publicize their critiques of contemporary capitalism in ways that bypassed the mainstream media. In this respect, we build on the work of Jenkins, who claimed that “those silenced by corporate media have been among the first to transform their computer into a printing press. This opportunity has benefitted third parties, revolutionaries, reactionaries, and racists alike” (Jenkins, 2006: 221). The ends to which users—some of whom have been portrayed in the mainstream media as revolutionaries—incorporate Twitter into their protest activities represent the focus of this article. Based on 17 in-depth interviews with people involved in the OWS movement, we present a typology of Twitter uses, focusing on how both tweeting and retweeting functions have been utilized in conjunction with face-to-face protests. The accounts of these OWS activists, who use Twitter as a major component of their activities, highlight both the strengths and the limitations of this platform for contemporary protest. Thus, we seek to present a portrayal of technology use in the material/historical context of a broad-based social movement.

This draws on two disciplinary traditions which have historically been linked: communication and rhetoric and composition. Both fields remain faithful to the notion that language should be studied within a social context. In addition, both rhetoric and composition and communication have devoted significant attention in recent years to the impact of technology use on social, cultural, and material conditions. We believe that by drawing from the rich body of work established by both fields, we can come to a better understanding of complex rhetorical situations such as Occupy Wall Street, discovering how people are using language to construct new social and political realities, and how they are incorporating social media technologies into that process.

## **Digitally networked technologies, protest movements, and counterpublics**

In recent years, networked digital media have played an increasingly prominent role in social and political protest across the globe (Earl and Kimport, 2011; McCaughey and Ayers, 2003). The emerging scholarship on this phenomenon has highlighted a number of key functions that the social web may serve in protest movements. For instance, in their account of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, Khamis and Vaughan (2011) highlight how social media were used as tools of citizen journalism via mobile devices, allowing activists to bypass mainstream television coverage and directly document military violence on the ground for the international community. The authors also note how social networking platforms were instrumental for triggering mobilization prior to in-person protests in Tahrir Square, as the “We Are Khaled Said” Facebook page allowed for more than 50,000 protesters to coordinate their attendance. In addition, Earl and Kimport (2011) emphasize how protest movements sometimes capitalize on the affordances of internet technology for direct online action, such as in email-based petitioning and lobbying campaigns. However, since digital networked technologies and their applications are developing so rapidly in the contemporary context (particularly in terms of the mobile web-space), it is important for scholars to continue to chart how protest movements are utilizing various new online tools for a range of purposes. Through empirical investigations, researchers can develop a more robust model of these technologies’ contributions and limitations in relation to worldwide socio-political movements.

Our case study is particularly valuable for exploring emerging practices of online participation in protest, not only due to the prominent public profile of OWS, but also because of the key resonances between the movement itself and the digitally networked culture from which it largely emerged. Specifically, the OWS movement has been noted for adopting a leaderless, horizontal structure which has been characterized by Hardt and Negri (2011) as the “multitude form.” This organizational framework has been largely attributed to the political and philosophical principles of the movement, which generally emphasizes radical democratization in the interests of “the 99 percent.” As Hardt and Negri (2011) suggest, this focus on non-hierarchical organization may account for the movement’s widespread use of social media platforms which operate in a horizontal, peer-to-peer fashion and encourage diffuse popular participation: “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.”

The nature of ‘internetworked’, peer-to-peer communication has proven vital to the continued unfolding of the OWS movement. In particular, the way in which Twitter has allowed users from disparate locations to continuously tweet and retweet information about the movement outside of the strictures of mainstream media recalls Warner’s (2002) definition of a counterpublic: it “enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power” (Sheridan et al., 2012: 101). Another aspect of Warner’s definition is the idea that publics are not static, but rather depend on the circulation of discourse. Warner continues,

“No single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, even a single medium ... Not texts themselves create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time” (Warner, 2002: 90). While numerous digital communication platforms open up spaces for textual circulation and may therefore contribute to the formation of publics and counterpublics, we are interested here in how Twitter is used as a privileged tool for building horizontal, “multitude”-like networks of exchange that facilitate, supplement and extend face-to-face protest movements.

Another aspect of counterpublics that we find especially pertinent to our study is the rhetorically critical concept of audience. Fraser (1990) identifies the broadening of audience as one of the major characteristics of a counterpublic, arguing that its strength rests in its ability “to disseminate one’s discourse into ever widening arenas” (Fraser, 1990: 67). As she explains,

On the one hand, [counterpublics] function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides” (Fraser, 1990: 68).

The use of networked digital technologies in contemporary protest movements has greatly intensified this dialectic between internal and external publics, as messages shared via online platforms have the potential to find worldwide audiences. The examples we highlight in this study thus draw attention to the OWS counterpublic’s engagement with multiple audiences, as public tweets serving the internal needs of the movement may double as opportunities to inform external publics, publicize the cause, and potentially recruit new members.

Indeed, the specific architecture of Twitter has been noted by scholars for its particular emphasis on rapid textual exchange among a multitude of actors and publics. Sheridan et al. (2012) have pointed out that the brevity of Twitter messages—limited to only 140 characters—almost seems to be purposefully designed for quick circulation. They claim that Twitter messages “privilege circulation *almost* to the exclusion of other concerns” (Sheridan et al., 2012: 61). These authors use the term “rhetorical circulation” to address the fact that authors who compose in Twitter (or in any other medium of concise expression) are often rhetorically savvy about how they can draw in their audience with few words, using brevity to their advantage: “Composers’ decisions anticipate future considerations of distribution. Processes of circulation inform both the material and the symbolic considerations of composing. The moment of circulation inhabits the moment of composition” (Sheridan et al., 2012: 63–64). Circulation and composition are inextricably linked, demonstrating how the rhetorical canons of invention, arrangement, and delivery all inform each other within a composing situation. Thus, we call attention to circulation as a major consideration in how users capitalize on the affordances of Twitter, how the OWS movement has become so dispersed and has grown so quickly, and how the OWS network on Twitter functions as a counterpublic.

## Method

In the following qualitative empirical study, we seek to highlight the experiences of people who have been working consistently to further the cause of the OWS movement.

For this reason, we chose to interview people who were engaged in the movement, at least in part, through Twitter. Since Twitter is a central focus of our study, we felt that we should recruit respondents through that platform. Specifically, we targeted Twitter accounts that made frequent mention of OWS in their tweets (for instance, using hashtags such as #OWS and #Occupy); this included both personal accounts of individual protesters and organization-oriented accounts of local OWS movements across the United States. In total, we interviewed 17 respondents (10 male and seven female) representing a diverse range of geographic locations (including New York City; Boston, Chicago, Austin, Portland, Seattle, Helena, and various parts of California). The respondents also varied greatly in terms of their level of involvement in face-to-face OWS protests; some noted themselves as being heavily instrumental in planning and coordinating occupations, while others characterized their involvement as more peripheral. Each described engaging in a significant amount of Twitter activity related to the movement, thus reflecting our recruitment strategy. This small purposive sample is not intended to be representative of Twitter-using OWS activists as a whole, and therefore there are limitations to the study's generalizability. We believe that the rich first-hand data gained from this small-scale qualitative interview study has a useful role to play in theory-building, and can inform future empirical studies that employ other methods.

Each interview was conducted over the phone and audio-recorded. After transcribing the interviews, we drew on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to identify thematic codes for analyzing the data. After writing up our findings, we submitted a draft of our article to 10 respondents who requested copies, asking them if they were comfortable with the way they were represented; none requested edits.

Our methodological approach draws from Sullivan and Porter's (1997) notion of a postmodern view of critical research practice. They argue for "a view of research as a set of critical and reflective practices (praxis) that are sensitive to the rhetorical situatedness of respondents and technologies and that recognize themselves as a form of political and ethical action" (Sullivan and Porter, 1997: ix). Of the important aspects of a postmodern methodology that the authors outline, we drew particularly on two guiding principles. The first is continuous researcher reflexivity, or the researchers' relationship to the research site(s). While both of us had used Twitter before, we were not privy to some of its restrictions. Rather than tweeting through our personal accounts, we set up a new, professional-sounding account entitled "OWSprofessors." In doing so, however, we essentially appeared as newcomers to the Twitter community; though we quickly began to follow 242 users, we initially had very few followers. In our attempt at appearing professional, we may have compromised some credibility as Twitter community members—which may have affected the number of respondents we ultimately gained.

Another aspect of a postmodern methodology that we used to guide or project is the notion that researchers need to be sensitive to local conditions. In our case, the "local" was composed of the technological software. While we initially outlined a plan for recruiting respondents, Twitter itself dictated that we try another approach. Initially, we thought that we would simply send out a short message of recruitment to each of the individuals/groups that we followed. We soon discovered that Twitter does not allow users to send out the same message to several different accounts in quick succession. Our account was frozen several times because we violated this rule. While we hypothesized that Twitter contains this particular constraint to minimize spam messages, we believe

that this feature limits scholars interested in researching the platform. Once we gained a good number of followers and people began to retweet our messages, our study built momentum; initially, however, it was difficult as researchers to gain traction in Twitter. This experience reinforced the importance of researchers paying close attention to local, material contexts, especially when those contexts involve technologies.

## **Using Twitter in OWS: seven overlapping roles**

When respondents were asked to describe how they used Twitter in relation to the OWS movement, they pointed to a wide range of online activities. In total, we identified seven overlapping roles: facilitating face-to-face protests via advertisements and donation solicitations; live reporting from face-to-face protests; forwarding news via links and retweets; expressing personal opinions regarding the movement; engaging in discussion about the movement; making personal connections with fellow activists; and facilitating online-based actions. While some of these roles were brought up more often and discussed in more detail than others, each describes a significant area of activity with which respondents engaged as a means of participating in the movement online. Together, this typology of roles helps to elucidate the complex and interconnected ways in which OWS activists use Twitter in the service of the movement.

### *Facilitating face-to-face protests (e-mobilization)*

One popular way of using Twitter in relation to OWS was through what Earl and Kimport (2011) refer to as “e-mobilization,” i.e., situations in which “the web is used to facilitate the sharing of information in the service of an offline protest action” (Earl and Kimport, 2011: 13). E-mobilization focuses specifically on how online communication tools are used to essentially mimic more traditional forms of protest mobilization—in particular, formal advertisements announcing time and date information. Here, Twitter essentially extends and magnifies the reach of earlier print-based promotional tools such as leaflets, fliers, and posters, getting word out about upcoming events rapidly and to a potentially broader audience.

Some respondents who were deeply involved in organizing and coordinating local occupations used Twitter in this promotional capacity, often composing their own original announcements for actions and meetings. For example, Ivan, an early participant in the New York City protests who was involved in “pretty much all the working groups,” explained that “there’s events every day [in New York], so I just try to keep people informed with that and what’s going on, so we can get the maximum amount of people out there.” Frank, a primary organizer of protests in his town in Southern California, similarly described “putting out notice of meetings or protests ... advertising activities of the group.” While there may be nothing new in spreading the word about face-to-face protests via advertising messages, social media platforms like Twitter allow this to be done more quickly than in any other medium, potentially leading to significantly increased turnout. Indeed, as Ivan’s comments about using Twitter to ensure the “maximum amount” of attendees suggests, OWS activists were keenly aware of the platform’s multiplication effect and strategically employed it to facilitate face-to-face actions.

In addition to promoting event attendance, organizers used Twitter for logistical purposes, helping to keep the protests running once they had started. Specifically, some respondents noted using the platform to solicit donations of supplies on behalf of the attendees. According to Grace, an organizer whose facilitation efforts included launching the “official” Twitter account for her local city occupation in Boston,

people would send messages there all the time, “what can I do?,” “what can I bring?,” and so then I would run over to, say, the food tent ... And then I would put it on blast with that “needs of the occupiers” hashtag.

This particular type of e-mobilization of face-to-face protests highlights the specific affordances of mobile technology, as the “needs of the occupiers” could be disseminated in real time from the ground. In this respect, e-mobilization does not necessarily precede offline action. Rather, as the above accounts illustrate, this online facilitation can carry into the event itself as protestors use Twitter to continue their efforts in real time. This point draws attention to the increasing hybridity between online and offline spaces of protest engendered by mobile social media, and suggests how Earl and Kimport’s (2011) concept of e-mobilization can be refined in order to account for recent technological and social developments.

### *Live reporting from face-to-face protests (citizen journalism)*

Another way in which the affordances of mobile technology were utilized was in the direct reporting of events from the ground. As has been well documented in protests in recent years (Khamis and Vaughan, 2011; Rheingold, 2003), smartphones allow attendees to become peer-to-peer citizen journalists, sharing updates, photos, and video of protests with worldwide audiences in real time. For some, such instant reports from in-progress actions served as an informal means of promoting attendance. Owen, an early organizer of Occupy Portland who described “using social media through Twitter and Facebook to ... notify people of what is coming up so that they can get involved,” explained that “live tweeting ... is where you actually report from the event or from the action and give updates of what’s going on, and then try to get people from other cities as well as the people in your city engaged.”

For those already attending the events, live updates also could serve a practical function, particularly when documenting altercations with police. Richard, who joined the self-described “Twitter team” of Occupy Austin as a way of assisting the protests, explained how he informed protestors of important safety information by tweeting out reports such as “arrests might be imminent” and “police have backed down, arrests no longer imminent.” It is important to note that tweets of this nature may appeal to both intra-OWS audiences and external audiences, and can therefore be considered both e-mobilization and citizen journalism. Because the Twitter infrastructure contains low barriers to accessing other people’s online activity (unlike, for example, Facebook), new OWS participants and supporters may learn about the movement (and may even be compelled to join) by seeing a tweet such as Richard’s: that is, one that draws attention to the ongoing tension between protestors and the police.



In addition to using Twitter for on-the-ground updates, many stressed the utility of “live-tweeting” the proceedings of meetings taking place at OWS events. Hannah, a self-described “part-timer” whose participation in the New York City protests was limited by her work schedule, explained that these direct transcriptions from the ground helped extend the meetings beyond their physical confines: “I think during the general assembly meetings it was essential... the live stream would be the only connection you could have with those meetings if you weren’t there.” As with Richard’s comment, Hannah’s example highlights the complexities of audience in relation to Twitter. While some audience members might be OWS participants (who either missed the meeting or who wanted a record of what was said), other audience members might be drawn to the movement based on the content of what was said at the meetings. Richard expressed a similar sentiment about a broad audience when he stressed how these “live-tweeted” records of meetings helped to make the movement honest and open to the outside: “By tweeting about what’s happening, everyone is aware of what’s going on here, and there are no secrets about our goals.” Thus, the protesters’ ability to use smartphones to document the movement’s on-the-ground activities in real time contributed to an expanding role for citizen journalism, as live-tweeters could bridge the gap between online and offline spaces of engagement—as well as internal and external publics—in multiple ways.

### *Retweeting information and incorporating links (second-hand circulation)*

Many respondents also identified Twitter’s retweeting and linking functions as a central aspect of their OWS participation online. One major aspect of this second-hand information circulation was sharing links to professional news articles related to OWS, covering everything from altercations with police to stories involving broader issues of concern to the movement. In many cases, respondents prefaced these links to mainstream news stories with introductory text in order to place the story in the context of OWS discourse. By writing new headlines, activists could not only help their followers quickly understand and easily index the articles, but also reframe the material in their own terms. Brian, who began using Twitter to “get the word [about OWS] out as much as possible” before the first protests in New York City started, recounted that

there was a study from the BBC news that showed that wealth per family was incredibly disparate according to race ... And so I tweeted that link to the BBC and said something like “Occupy Wall Street: the fight against wealth disparity is also a fight against racism.” ... I would try to as much as I could draw connections.

Here, Brian sought to establish more concrete connections among multiple media actors within a communicative network by tying relevant news articles to the burgeoning OWS movement.

Beyond circulating professional journalism via links, some respondents also described retweeting citizen journalists’ first-hand accounts. By relaying these tweets from the ground, these users effectively helped to create an alternative news media network for the OWS movement on Twitter. Julie, an activist based in Washington State who was unable to attend many face-to-face protests due to a busy work schedule, explained how

this sort of retweeting activity was central to her participation in OWS: “I call myself a signal booster ... I repost live streams, and I quote from live streams to other folks who can’t watch or participate.” For Julie, this relaying activity dovetailed with her goal of reaching out to people outside of OWS and educating them about the movement:

There are a lot of followers that I have that aren’t necessarily into the Occupy movement, and they really haven’t in my experience tak[en] the time to learn. So I’m boosting the signal to those folks so that they might, even if they don’t agree, at least learn a little more.

The utility of this Twitter-enabled alternative news network to supplement or counteract problematic mainstream press coverage was stressed by numerous respondents. Like Julie, Erica was not content just to read citizen journalists’ reports of the protests in New York City in order to stay informed: she opted to pass them along to broader audiences in order to “keep information flowing [and] make sure that people continue to have current information that’s accurate, and not just what the mainstream media wants people to believe.” By simply forwarding news about the protests and related issues in a peer-to-peer fashion, these Twitter users actively contributed to the growth of an OWS counter-public, expanding it beyond the boundaries of any one physical locale.

### *Expressing personal views about the movement (editorial commentary)*

In addition to disseminating information, some users employed Twitter as a kind of personal “soapbox,” allowing protestors to express their personal opinions and views. Danielle, who helped run the “official” Twitter account of a local occupation in Massachusetts as a member of the “media team,” described how her personal account gave her an opportunity for reflexivity about the movement in which she was deeply involved: “If I had suggestions or rants or disappointments or outrage ... I would usually keep that to my personal account, and try to use the main account as organizationally as possible.”

While much of this editorial commentary focused on the internal issues of the movement itself, some respondents noted using Twitter to express their views on the broader social and political issues which OWS was addressing. Julie, for instance, noted using her account as a soapbox for her own “commentary on corruption, corruption in politics, and the overwhelming corporate influence.” Indeed, much discussion of blogging as a form of political participation has focused on the primary role of making opinion statements (Wallsten, 2008), although the overlapping and multifarious Twitter activities described by respondents generally support Wallsten’s contention that “political blogging ... is a complex form of political participation that blends hypertext links, opinionated commentary, calls to political action, and requests for feedback in different ways at different moments in time” (Wallsten, 2008: 19).

### *Engaging in discussion regarding the movement (online deliberation)*

Some respondents also mentioned using Twitter to engage in debate with others about both the movement itself and related political issues. However, these respondents often

stressed the difficulty of using Twitter for this kind of dialogue. For instance, Erica encountered problems in using the platform to debate economic issues with those who oppose her views: “Most of the time the platform doesn’t really support that sort of exchange ... I used to get into Twitter arguments with members of the Tea Party, and they could get really frustrating.” In a similar fashion, Danielle explained that Twitter is

not exactly a great way to talk to detractors. If people just are absolutely opposed to you, or think that your Occupy is an eyesore ... I mean if people are just unwilling to engage with it thoughtfully, then it’s not really a great way to convince them.

Scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition and elsewhere have addressed the limits of online deliberative dialogue (Dean, 2003; McKee, 2005), pointing out that characteristics such as anonymity and low barriers to entry/exit make dialogue between disagreeing parties challenging. The data from our study suggest that the same patterns often hold true for Twitter, although users continue to seek out this platform as a space for engaging in deliberative dialogue, despite frequent frustration.

### *Making connections with fellow activists (strengthening ties)*

An additional aspect of Twitter use in relation to OWS involves the strengthening of personal ties between members of the movement. By interacting informally with other like-minded activists, some respondents noted gaining a sense of community, solidarity, and group identity. For instance, Erica emphasized how Twitter helped to bring people together across the various locations of the face-to-face protests, creating bonds between members and boosting morale. When asked what she saw as the goal of using Twitter in relation to the movement, she responded:

unifying people ... really it’s the first time that it’s very common and supportive for so many different kinds of people to just sort of mesh together. ... But being able to be in contact, and you meet people in New York who feel the same way you do. It can be really liberating and satisfying, and encouraging.

This use of Twitter to connect with like-minded people on a personal level and foster a sense of community may not constitute formal participation in OWS, yet such building of social ties has long been recognized as an integral aspect of building social movements (McAdam and Paulsen, 1993). As Erica’s account suggests, such ties contributed to an awareness of the breadth and strength of the movement, reinforcing these activists’ commitment to their own participation.

In some cases, the friendship networks created on Twitter also appeared to have a more directly instrumental function in terms of aiding movement organization. Grace explained how personal connections made on Twitter assisted the more formal planning and strategy meetings in which she was involved:

I’ve had conference calls with a couple of people from other occupations, because I feel comfortable enough knowing them on Twitter to ask them personal questions about their [general assembly] process ... that would’ve never happened were it not for Twitter ... you get to know them as people.

Chris, an on-the-ground participant in the New York City protests who used Twitter primarily for his own movement-related commentary, described how New York City-based OWS protestors used Twitter to organize informal meetings for socializing with fellow movement members. As he explained, these recreational meetings served an instrumental role as well: “[it] was a good clearinghouse for meeting the people that are actually down there doing things, if you want to make something happen at Occupy Wall Street.”

As their accounts demonstrate, the informal personal interactions facilitated via Twitter provided Chris and Grace with a foundation for more formal coordination activities. Like Erica’s and Danielle’s, their experiences draw attention to how social media platforms blur the boundaries between the social and the political, contributing to community and solidarity-building which may serve as a pretext for more direct participation in protests. Thus, the important role of informal tie-building—often overlooked in more instrumentally focused typologies of online activism (Earl and Kimport, 2011)—should be included in our understanding of the multiple and complex ways in which digital platforms like Twitter are used in the service of protest movements.

### *Facilitating online-based actions (e-tactics)*

Finally, a few respondents described how OWS activists engaged in activities via Twitter which resemble what Earl and Kimport (2011) term “e-tactics,” i.e., actions such as online petitioning and lobbying that largely take place online and do not involve physical co-presence. As Owen recounted,

There was a really bad bill ... It basically would make it a felony offense for me to go on Twitter and say “hey, you should go into a sit-in at this bank.”... So when they try to pass that bill, we put together a little list of the people who sponsored the bill, their numbers and all that, and asked people to call them.

In Owen’s example, the online campaign to lobby state legislators was directly connected with other uses of Twitter in relation to OWS, as the e-tactic sought to defend the right of protesters to promote and facilitate offline actions with digital tools. Rather than existing in isolation, the multiple ways in which this social media tool was utilized in the service of the movement thus appeared to reinforce each other in a number of important respects.

### *The overlapping nature of activist roles on Twitter*

While the above typology helps to explicate the ways in which OWS activists used Twitter as a means of participating in the movement, it is important to stress the fluidity of roles and the mixing of genres as opposed to making rigid distinctions. Each respondent appeared to strike a unique balance in terms of taking on an identity for their Twitter account or accounts. Some appeared to specialize in only one or two roles. As noted above, Chris mostly focused his Twitter account on personal commentary about the movement while avoiding other uses. However, respondents often took on a number of these roles simultaneously, and created unique combinations to form their individual

Twitter account identities. Some (such as Grace and Danielle) even had multiple accounts to facilitate some of these different roles, as they tweeted from an “official” local Occupy Twitter account to share information about face-to-face actions while also using a personal account to express more individual views. Others appeared to engage in nearly all of these roles simultaneously from a single account. For example, Andrew, who joined the “media team” of the New York City protests in their first week as a way of “help[ing] out,” explained that he used his Twitter feed “for pretty much anything that involved the movement ... it could be political news, or it could be law enforcement news, or it could be internal, events, or anything related.”

The fluidity between internal and external audiences marks a further way in which roles on Twitter overlap within the movement. While activists might send out a tweet with fellow OWS members in mind, a broader audience is always also privy to these communications. Depending upon who views it, the same “live tweet” may help to facilitate intra-movement operations on the ground, offer concrete journalistic information to a broader public, promote the cause by catching the attention of potential new recruits, and (as discussed below) alert the police to the movement’s local activities. In other words, tweets in the OWS counterpublic always serve multiple audiences and multiple purposes.

Finally, an important point to emphasize is the large degree of fluidity between composing original tweets and forwarding those written by others. For many respondents, their relay of pre-existing material appeared to be just as meaningful a form of participation as drafting original tweets. In their accounts, there was little distinction made between composition and forwarding roles on Twitter, and nearly all respondents seemed to include both simultaneously in their feeds, sometimes within the same tweet. By including these forwarding activities as part of their online participation, these Twitter users worked to expand the circulation of information, building and sustaining the OWS counterpublic.

## **Communicating in the horizontal crowd: the 140-character limit**

The centrality of circulating information in a peer-to-peer horizontal structure appeared to shape the composition of original messages to a large extent. When respondents discussed creating new tweets, they seemed to display an inherent awareness of how the “viral” spread of messages on social media platforms requires authors to compose in a clear, succinct and attention-grabbing manner that encourages retweeting. The ability to have a tweet reposted by someone else means that rhetorically savvy users often compose with this potentiality in mind. In other words, users who utilize Twitter often compose with “rhetorical velocity” (Ridolfo and DeVoss, 2009). As Sheridan et al. (2012: 79) explains, “Thinking about rhetorical velocity includes ... rhetorical concerns about what might motivate a third party to redistribute and/or recompose the text, or what might give the text future velocity.” Because Twitter users (by and large) wanted their OWS messages to be widely circulated, they had to pay attention to how they could work within the constraints of the platform to enable future distribution.

For some respondents, the 140-character limit of messages on Twitter was generally seen as advantageous rather than constraining, since it forced them to condense their communications into short bursts of text with the capacity for velocity. For instance, Ivan, who often used to Twitter to directly promote OWS events and actions in New York City, explained how the brevity of tweets served to catch his audience's attention:

I think the 140 character thing is like actually more helpful than hurtful ... it's like when a commercial is being played, they say that a commercial shouldn't be longer than 30 seconds, and if it is, they've all left ... It's the same way with a tweet, if you don't get it out in like two sentences, then people are going to be like "alright, what am I reading?"

When describing "headlining" news article links, Andrew made a similar point about the benefits of the succinctness and piquancy encouraged by the 140-character format: "You go straight to the point of whatever you're trying to say, or whatever news you're trying to spread ... so you get the idea right away ... you can make the headline catchier by using other words."

Furthermore, several OWS participants noted that they did not feel the 140-character limit was constraining because they could navigate around it by employing other social media platforms. Here, Twitter was conceptualized as only one part of a much larger digital ecosystem that offered activists many different ways to communicate, a point that has also been emphasized in recent literature on digital technology and social movements (Trere, 2012). In many cases, Twitter was interconnected with these other, more expansive digital platforms via links. For instance, Erica explained that "usually when people are trying to express a more developed view, then they will blog and then tweet their blog." Considering the simultaneous use of these other interlinked platforms, Twitter should be understood as one part of a broader digital media effort of OWS which served a particular role—one that was specifically shaped by its 140-character limit format.

However, the centrality of Twitter's role in the movement (a point agreed upon by many respondents) suggests the importance of quick-moving, attention-grabbing, byte-sized communication in a protest movement characterized by its horizontal and "multitude"-like nature. With thousands of members needing to share information without a hierarchical communication structure (or power structure for that matter), messages must be crafted for easy circulation and indexing. This privileges brevity over length, timeliness over reflectiveness, and an overall focus on piquancy in the service of grabbing the attention of a decentralized network. Thus, the concept of "rhetorical velocity" helps to account for how horizontal protest movements like OWS capitalize on the affordances of Twitter to foster circulation and quickly build new counterpublics.

## **Concerns about Twitter as a platform for protest: restrictions and surveillance**

While respondents were mostly positive about using Twitter as means of participating in the OWS movement, they often identified problems with relying on an external, corporate-owned social media platform as the basis for these activities. Specifically, some

respondents pointed to restrictions that Twitter places on using the service in relation to the OWS movement—sometimes perceived as deliberate censorship—as well as the ability for law enforcement to easily monitor OWS-related activity on Twitter. These two issues together provide an important rejoinder to any wholly optimistic view of how Twitter can be used to the benefit of movements such as OWS. Although activists have a great deal of freedom to use this social media tool to pursue a variety of goals, the fact that they do not control the platform means that this freedom does indeed come with constraints.

When asked if there were any limitations to using Twitter in relation to the OWS movement, some respondents explained that the site did not allow them to do everything they wanted. Lauren, a member of Occupy Chicago who noted using Twitter every day to “let people know what’s going on,” drew attention to one area in which Twitter appeared to place such restrictions:

they don’t let Occupy hashtags become trending topics. So they’re not censoring my tweets personally, but, you know, there might be thousands of us tweeting about it and they won’t let it show up as one of the topics that’s being talked about.

Here, the concern is not with the freedom to compose tweets, but rather the ability for these messages to spread within the site; again, this points to the central importance of circulation in activists’ efforts of to use Twitter in the service of the movement.

On the other hand, Andrew described how, in the early days of the first New York City protests, Twitter users apparently encountered more direct censorship when using movement-related hashtags, a restriction which he believed was politically motivated: “it was the Occupy Wall Street hashtag that was getting censored sometimes. You send tweets out with that hashtag and they wouldn’t go out, they wouldn’t go through.” Andrew went on to recount how OWS members responded to Twitter using these very same online tools:

We would actually comment ... asking them “why are you censoring this tweet? Why are you censoring this hashtag?” ... So once you start spreading the word, and once it goes public, then Twitter had to do something about it ... to clear their name.

Thus, Andrew’s account highlights how e-tactics (Earl and Kimport, 2011) may work to rectify problems with censorship and restrictions, as Twitter proved to be responsive to online public-based pressure from OWS activists.

Yet while censorship was perceived to be a potentially fixable problem, if it even was one at all, a more pressing concern was how using Twitter made OWS activists vulnerable to government and police surveillance. Indeed, as the Malcolm Harris case involving the New York OWS protests has recently demonstrated, Twitter can be forced by the courts to turn over records of tweets if they contain information pertinent to legal proceedings (Associated Press, 2012). In this high-profile case, a Manhattan judge ruled that since Harris’ tweets could reveal whether he was aware of police orders when marching on the Brooklyn Bridge, Twitter was legally responsible for releasing his tweeting history. While Twitter has been credited by internet freedom advocates for

fighting against the judge's order, and while a spokesperson has stated that "we continue to have a steadfast commitment to our users and their rights," members of OWS may justifiably be wary of using the company's platform to coordinate protests that often exist outside the boundaries of legality.

For instance, Grace described how the local protests in Massachusetts in which she was involved were heavily monitored by law enforcement: "The police department watches our Twitter like crazy. They watch my Twitter and they watch the official Twitter, and they probably watch a few other people." While she recognized that this could be a drawback of using Twitter for OWS protests, she went on to explain that "at the same time I think we feel the need to be transparent ... we want to be really honest about our plans and what we do and our next steps and all of that." Richard similarly called attention to police monitoring of Twitter in Occupy Austin, although he emphasized how OWS activists were adapting in response to this surveillance and taking some of their communications off the network:

We know from some recent stuff that various government agencies are monitoring social media. So it's just an awareness of what is said and when and how and to whom, and also what networks you communicate on ... There's some things that we're moving to other channels where it will be encrypted and it will be less able to be spied on.

Facing problems with both restrictions on use and vulnerability to outside surveillance, respondents stressed how OWS activists were taking proactive steps to work around these issues, whether by lobbying Twitter to change its policies or by turning to alternative online communication platforms that could offer a greater degree of freedom. Thus, while the respondents' optimism regarding Twitter use in the service of the OWS movement was sometimes tempered by the realities of a platform controlled by an external company with its own agenda, they perceived the potential solutions to lie not in the avoidance of social media technologies but rather in their more careful and clever use.

## **Conclusion**

The above first-hand accounts of Twitter users involved in the OWS movement suggest a number of key points about the developing relationship between social media and protest in the contemporary context. First, the OWS case study demonstrates how the digital circulation of texts (which includes links, photos, and video in addition to prose) allows protestors to very quickly build a geographically dispersed, networked counterpublic that can articulate a critique of power outside of the parameters of mainstream media. Twitter allows the OWS counterpublic to publicize its activities to many audiences simultaneously, enabling OWS participants to concurrently communicate among themselves and also potentially attract sympathetic outside audiences. While movements like OWS utilize a range of communication networks for this broad purpose, Twitter appears to have a privileged role in textual circulation due to certain key structural features. Specifically, the platform's focus on short messages that can be easily comprehended, forwarded and supplemented encourages protestors to compose their tweets



with “rhetorical velocity”, as well as to participate in second-hand circulation via linking and retweeting. In other words, Twitter’s technical specifics are not only amenable to the intensive textual circulation necessary for building and sustaining a counterpublic, but may in fact foster such processes through the aggregated tweeting and retweeting activities of individual users. For protest movements such as OWS that adopt a non-hierarchical, horizontal structure as a matter of political and philosophical principle, Twitter’s participatory and networked structure of circulation seems to hold particular importance, as its very form resonates with these broader organizational dynamics. This suggests that Twitter will continue to be embraced by such horizontal protest movements as a central locus of promotion, information-sharing, organizing, and community-building in years to come.

A second key point to emerge from our data is that the roles of online participation adopted by protestors are greatly multiplying and expanding, particularly due to the affordances of emergent digital technologies. Indeed, the many roles outlined above hinge upon the hybridity between physical and virtual spaces produced by the use of smartphones, as protesters integrate online and offline protest activities in a variety of ways (such as soliciting donations in direct response to on-the-ground needs, as well as extending the reach of face-to-face meetings by live-tweeting minutes). In addition, the sharing functions essential to the design of contemporary social media platforms (such as the retweeting feature on Twitter) allow movement members who are not present at face-to-face actions to participate in the circulation of texts and thus take on active roles in the shaping of a critical counterpublic. Acting, as one respondent put it, as “signal boosters,” these protesters from dispersed geographic locations use Twitter-based circulation to amplify the rhetoric of face-to-face protests and contribute to the growth of the movement across physical boundaries.

However, the optimism of these first two points is tempered by the fact that these circulation networks built by protesters on Twitter (as well as on other digital platforms) are not entirely theirs to control, but are rather administered by external commercial entities that may not always operate with the interests of the movement in mind. Dependence on external platforms leaves protesters vulnerable to restrictions on their ability to communicate (including the possibility of politically motivated censorship), as well as to unwanted surveillance from authorities who have notably exercised the legal right to access digital records. While members of OWS are addressing these vulnerabilities through numerous technologically based solutions, the widespread reliance on commercial platforms such as Twitter means that such tensions will continue to be of concern for contemporary protest movements.

Thus, a third key point to emerge from this case study of Twitter use in the OWS movement is that the opportunities to build widespread counterpublics across geographic boundaries presented by popular social media platforms also come with significant attending risks. When utilizing a digital architecture that they do not control, movements like OWS must continually navigate around the incursions of those who do in fact hold this control and may be potentially hostile to the goals of the movement. Indeed, the ongoing struggles between protesters and entities like Twitter over the right to freely compose and circulate texts on their own terms will likely shape the future development of online participation in protest movements to a large degree.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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