

Chapter 79

#OccupyWallStreet: Social Media, Education, and the Occupy Movement

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ABSTRACT

The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, when viewed within proper historical context, can be considered part of an American tradition of higher education activism. The movement's pioneering use of social media, which was in part inspired by activists within the Arab Spring, allowed OWS to organize and disseminate information with efficiency. Social media also helped to build the connections that were made between OWS activists and those within higher education, while subsequently providing documentation of these same connections in online forums. This chapter's analysis of OWS tactics provides evidence that social media will be integral to the organization and promotion of future activist movements within higher education and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has long been a place for, and engine of, social activism. The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement fits within this history of activism, even though its ties to higher education may not be immediately apparent. Geographic ties, campus environments, and faculty and student participation all served as important functions that aided the Occupy movement directly and indirectly. Looking at the historical perspective of American student activism, we can also begin to draw out some themes that carry through to Occupy Wall Street. Occupy built upon recent

movements, partnered with leading academics and scholars of the era, and was carried out by a disenfranchised portion of the highly educated populace, which all parallel the movement's higher education-associated antecedents.

A distinct aspect of Occupy Wall Street is the integral nature of digital technology to the movement. The emergence of social media as an organizing tool worked to develop and strengthen the connection between members. It also aided the development of the movement's priorities, spread information internationally, and helped to bring the messages of OWS into the mainstream. Within this growth was a notable connection between

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Occupy and higher education. The messaging of the movement drew many participants in from colleges and universities, as it often echoed the priorities of both students and higher education employees. Further, the role of social media as a conduit between participants helps us to identify the ways in which higher education played a part in OWS. Although the Occupy movement included participants from beyond the collegiate environment and it did not begin on a university campus, the ties that formed over the course of the development of OWS position it well within the historical narrative of higher education activism.

Occupy Wall Street and its associated spin-offs generated a great deal of media coverage from its beginnings in mid-2011 through the present. The movement's core philosophies, while debated openly within the group and by outsiders alike, generated conversations across the globe. Much of this dialogue was not confined to the walls of New York City's Zuccotti Park, and it was mostly not even confined to any physical environment at all. In fact, the Occupy Wall Street movement had a dynamic existence that existed simultaneously in physical locations across the world and in online environments. Forums, social networking sites, live and delayed video feeds, and countless other new media methods carried and cultivated the messages that originated in New York City. Indications are that the OWS community was highly educated, in many ways affiliated with the education system (as students or as employees), and driven by a desire for social justice. The intersection of education and technology was a primary force behind what became a global movement. In an election year in the United States that saw conversations about the national wealth gap, the "99%," the "1%," and the role of money within politics, it is hard to ignore the impact that the Occupy Wall Street movement had on national politics. It must also be understood that the Occupy movement had a global impact, although for the purposes of this chapter, the American context will serve as the focus.

ORIGINS OF THE OWS MOVEMENT

OWS is a movement that was borne out of not only a meeting of time, place, and political circumstance, but also out of the opportunities that came with a changing media landscape. The proliferation of social media use played an integral role in bringing citizens together quickly and, for an organization with many messages and messengers, under a unified banner. Occupy Wall Street's roots can be traced back to February of 2011, when *Adbusters* magazine ran an editorial piece on their website by Kono Matsu entitled "A Million Man March on Wall Street." Matsu's writing is a simple but prescient article, in which the author claims that past revolutionary movements were not actually random, spontaneous, and leaderless, but instead they were carefully thought out and organized. Matsu (2011) states that in the beginnings of the Arab Spring in Egypt's Tahrir Square, a small group of "Internet savvy organizers" were met with 90,000 supporters after putting out a call for a day of protest.

This event, the author claims, was what gave the organizers the supportive push to carry out their work. In the days following this event, the group behind the movement made a concerted push to put together an intentional structure to aid progress, and this work included creating pamphlets (including one entitled "How to Rise Up"). Matsu then ruminates on what it would take for Americans to rise up in a similar fashion, and he notes the bleak employment and income situation for those outside the exclusive realm of the upper income bracket. The short editorial ends by telling readers that if we want to rise up and create change, "let's get organized, let's strategize, let's think things through" (Matsu, 2011).

Adbusters pushed the movement further via online media within a blog post in July of 2011 titled "#OCCUPYWALLSTREET: A shift in revolutionary tactics." This blog post, which received hundreds of comments, was centered on the following quote:

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