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Occupy PR: An analysis of online media communications of Occupy Wall Street and Occupy London

Ana Adi

Quadriga Hochschule Berlin, Werderscher Markt 13, D-10117 Berlin, Germany

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the communication strategies and struggles of the Occupy movement from a protest PR perspective through the analysis of online communication and digital footprints of some of the most prominent English-language Occupy groups: Occupy Wall Street and Occupy London. To do so, the article uses Adi & Moloney's (2012) social media audit principles and Sommerfeldt's (2011) mobilization resources together with social media data analysis platforms like Foller.me, Klout.com, Alexa.com and Ahrefs.com. It shows that like corporations, Occupy groups also struggle to find the balance between managing their reputation, controlling their image, sharing their messages and identifying and incentivizing conversations online.

1. Introduction

In 2011, urban protest camps and occupations captured the world's attention and imagination. Inspired by Tahrir and the May 15 movement in Spain, Occupy Wall Street began in September of 2011. Within less than a month its messages, practices and material form spread to over 950 cities in 80 countries. Distinct from other forms of social movement practices like demonstrations or marches, Occupy encampments are made through acts of collaboration that establish physical sites for both action and daily living. While Occupy stretched far beyond its urban centers, with thousands of online forums, it was the unique mixture between the online discussion and gatherings of people in the streets that fuelled conversations and debates.

This article explores the communication strategies and struggles of the Occupy movement from a protest PR perspective. Instead of looking at Occupy in relation to other organizations, this article looks at the online communication and digital footprints of some of the most prominent English-language occupy groups (Occupy Wall Street and Occupy London) more than three years after the media attention and the hype surrounding the occupations have passed. This article is therefore not about whether activist communication practices should be considered as part of public relations, but rather about how occupiers communicate.

E-mail address: ana.adi@gmail.com

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2. Activism online

At a time when more than a third of the world's population has access to the Internet (Internetworldstats, 2014), when Facebook could be in the world and when it is currently common practice for organizations of any size and type to be present on the web and social media, the concepts of dialogue and dissent/protest PR are of particular significance.

There are numerous studies examining the use and/or impact of the Internet, however many still focus on website communications (Basil & Erlandson, 2008; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Esrock & Leichty, 2000; McAllister-Spooner, 2009; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Sommerfeldt, Kent, & Taylor, 2012).

In an attempt to understand and provide solutions to communication discrepancies between corporations and activist groups, some recent studies have examined how activists use public relations and the Internet to achieve their goals (Adi & Miah, 2011; Adi & Moloney, 2012) while others focused on how institutions are responding to activism (Zietsma & Winn, 2008). All studies lead to similar conclusions: that the Internet is generally an effective tool to inform and motivate those already aware of and sympathetic to the causes under debate. Moreover, they argue that the wider the activists' support network online is, the greater their influence. This means that the clearer and more consistent the online communication of an activist group is, the greater the potential for meeting their campaign goals.

Recent studies are also debating the democratic powers of the Internet and its role as a medium for alternative voices to emerge and converge. Little however has been written about the social media strategies and tactics adopted by activist and protest groups in their efforts to gain power and visibility and legitimize their actions (Caren & Gaby, 2011; Ghanavizi, 2011; Juris, 2012). Therefore, there is a need to extend the examination of communication practices – both at strategic and tactical level – to incorporate social media. More importantly, there is a need to understand the legacy of activist and protest communications and their influence, if any, on current communication practices both corporate and non-corporate. This article aims to address this need.

3. The current study and its methodology

To examine the communication patterns and tactics, stakeholders addressed, as well as emerging strategies of two Occupy groups (Occupy London and Occupy Wall Street) this article used a multi-method, exploratory approach. Moving away from the single method approach characteristic to previous activist PR and Occupy studies (Esrock & Leichty, 2000; Ingenhoff and Koelling, 2009; Juris, 2012; Sommerfeldt, 2011), this article employs social media audits elaborating on Adi and Moloney's (2012) analysis of small scale Occupy group protests and their communication.

In doing so, this article focuses on two communication channels of each Occupy group: their website and their Twitter accounts noting, where possible, the presence of other social media accounts.

Occupy London was the largest Occupy camp in the UK. Occupy Wall Street on the other hand was the epicenter of the Occupy Movement. This makes the latter the benchmark for all Occupy groups and their communications.

The data collections started with the known websites and social media presences of the occupy groups; other social media accounts being discovered through clicking on associated links.

Several data collection moments were used, with no special significance or correlation to one another: on the 16th of July, the 7th of August and the 27th of August 2014. At each data collection moment activity data automatically reported by Twitter (date of opening the account, number of followers, tweets, RTs) was collected together with search and traffic data.

Other details such as the avatar, bio and descriptions of the accounts, the visual and message coherence of the accounts, the types of messages shared and any emerging themes were also recorded as they enabled reflection over how Occupy groups communicate post-occupy. Sommerfeldt's (2011) concept of mobilization resources was then used to assess the presence of coalition building, particular attention being paid to the existence of tangible and intangible resource mobilization features.

Automatic data analysis platforms were also used in the data collection and also as a means to gain further insight. These include Foller.me[1], Klout.com, Alexa.com and Ahrefs.com.[2] They enabled the discovery of emerging communication themes, the observation of each account's communication network, the analysis of information about traffic and traffic sources, and the account's influence.

4. Occupy

Occupy's beginnings were marked by an Adbusters' subvertisement showing a ballerina dancing on a statue in the heart of New York's financial district. The ad copy rhetorically asked: "Are you ready for a Tahrir Moment?" and followed with the daring call: "On September 17, we want to see 20,000 people flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and Occupy Wall Street for a few months" (Feigenbaum, Frenzel, & McCurdy, 2013). The advertisement capitalized on the affective resonance produced in many who watched the revolutions in Egypt and harnessed this affect, daring its readers in the West to re-imagine what was possible.

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[1] Foller.me is an analytics application which provides insight about public Twitter profiles.

[2] Ahrefs.com's Site Explorer provides a free analysis of the links to domain with all its subdomains and reports it for one year. This enables the identification of inbound and outbound links as well as the referring pages which help identify the network of support of the website as well as its stakeholders.